

How to Protect a Dragon Conqueror

by Jayalaw

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Summary: When Alvin the Treacherous puts a bounty on Hiccup's head, too many Outcasts and Vikings want to get this Dragon Trainer. Hiccup needs to learn how to defend himself as Alvin's influence tightens around Berk. With Toothless out of commission and his killer instinct awakened in danger, Hiccup doesn't know if he'll come out of the ordeal intact. Set before "Heather Report,"

1. Prologue

****Hi all. This is a piece of fanfiction that I previously posted on Deviantart. I will be updating this daily.****

****Note: "How to Protect a Dragon Conqueror" takes place INSTEAD of "Heather Report" and the second half of season one. Thus, Alvin does not know how to ride dragons and is determined to learn.****

My name is Hiccup; you may know me as the chief's son who trained dragons, or you might know me as the Dragon Conqueror. You've probably seen my face on a Wanted poster. According to Alvin the Treacherous, a Viking outcast, I'm worth thirty sheep and a shipload of fish. Apparently that's only one sheep more than my dad, Stoick the Vast, who also rides dragons. We Vikings have our priorities straight.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. To put yourself in my shoes, a scrawny teenager with a metal left foot and a playful Night Fury, picture a cloudy day dotted with patches of muddy blue, like some blather-brained idiot had dabbed the sky with thick paint and then left to clean his boots. In doing so he had also dropped his favorite rocks into the ocean, creating the mountains that surround Berk. It was the perfect day for diving into the ocean.

That's what Toothless and I were doing. Toothless is my dragon, an ebony Night Fury with fierce loyalty and a rambunctious sense of sport. He growled contentedly as we surfed through the clouds; I was

letting the rush of cold wind jolt me out of lethargy because Toothless had woken me up early, banging on the roof with his tail. I had been up the night before writing records for the Dragon Academy, smudging the papers with my ink-stained hands.

"Go for it, bud," I whispered; Toothless rolled upside-down and let me fall. We had been sky-diving since Devastating Winter, enjoying the sudden drop that had once terrified us on our first flight. The belt tethering me to his saddle came unclipped, and we shot straight for the cold waters below. Toothless nudged me with two legs so that I spun; he also started spinning. A warm-throated laugh started in my throat. It would have emerged as a thrilled chuckle if Toothless's carefree expression hadn't changed.

See, my dragon has big, lemon-colored eyes that dilate in the face of danger. He also has four legs, all of which wrapped around me. I was enveloped in dark, leather skin.

"Toothless!" I tried to turn around, to see what was worrying him. He wrapped his wings tighter, locking me into place. "Bud! What-"

An arrow interrupted my question, narrowly missing Toothless's left wing. He veered to the right as another shower of arrows emerged.

"Son of a half-troll! Only Outcasts use . . ." I stopped talking. Rat-eating mudge bucket.

"We've got you now, Dragon Conqueror!" A familiar, rasping voice called out.

No. Not him. I could not deal with him right now, not when my dragon had decided to act on his instinct to protect his rider. How had Alvin the Treacherous, my dad's worst enemy, known about our morning flights?

"Toothless! You've got to let me go!" My dragon was looking away, possibly eyeing the harsh waters that had not seemed so perilous earlier. "Toothless, we've got to get out of here!"

"No dragon hide can withstand our arrows. Fire at will!" Sinew strings twanged in time as Outcast arrows shot as a wooden brigade.

"TOOTHLESS! NOW!"

Toothless rolled again so that his back took most of the arrows, keeping me enveloped in black leather, not that it would matter when we hit the water. Pain twisted his yellow eyes, but he closed them, undid four of his legs, and used the other two to flip my back onto the saddle. I pushed away whatever arrowheads I could, clicked my metal leg into place and opened my dragon's tail. It took to the breeze like a fan as we reversed directions, heading away from the Outcast ships. I would have stayed to fight, but my dragon needed medical attention. His wings were weighed down from the sharp arrows.

"Hang on, bud," I whispered as he flew into the cliffs that no boat could follow; it was like our first flight, when I had thrown away my cheat sheet and let my foot navigate us past the sharp

rocks.

Toothless, as if remembering the times I had crashed him into the cliffs, slapped my cheek with his ears. It was a light slap, though, and reassuring. It told me my dragon wanted to live. Alvin's rasping, angry orders faded as we navigated into the fog.

A harder slap would follow, however, once we had returned to Berk: telling my father about the attack.

2. Chapter One

****Thank you for all the favorites and kind words! This was a fun story to write in the fall, and it makes me happy to post it on . If you want to read the whole story, feel free to spoil yourself on my Deviantart: [gallery/42643272](https://www.deviantart.com/gallery/42643272) ****

****Risuchan0223- Thanks, and yes, Alvin is very evil in this story. ****

****ClassicBubble- Rest assured, you will. :)****

****Wild Hinata- That will have to wait for a chapter. First, Toothless needs medical care.****

****Oreramar- Thank you! Final exams finished, so I decided to celebrate by opening a account. :) ****

Toothless's wings were not flapping as rapidly, and his large eyes drooped. I could tell from his abrupt, shallow breaths that the arrows lodged into his back were taking their toll. He kept flying since swimming back to Berk would have been an open invitation for Alvin.

"Only a few more minutes, bud," I urged on as we caught sight of Berk's familiar knolls and familiar faces. The younger kids brandished their small spears and helmets to indicate that they had seen us, donned in full miniature battle armor.

We crashed onto harsh grass. I ran my hand over Toothless's back and saw the iron arrowheads embedded in his skin.

"Hiccup!" Gobber lumbered forward on his metal foot; he had switched his prosthetic arm for a sharp hammer. "Thank Odin you showed up! The Outcasts attacked the north part of the island and-" he stopped. "What in Thor's name happened?"

"It's Toothless," I panted, rolling off my lethargic dragon. "Alvin the Treacherous- too many arrows- Toothless is hurt-" I gestured. "Where are Astrid and Fishlegs and the others?"

"Helping your father; there are four to five Outcast ships at the northern end." Gobber reached to spin me around. "Astrid's leading the Dragon Academy's finest against our worst enemies; they'll be fine without you and Toothless."

"There's another attack? But Alvin was attacking me from the east." I tried to wrest out of Gobber's blacksmith grip. "Gobber, you should be checking on the dragon with a hundred arrows sticking out of his

back; I'm not injured."

"You call THIS not injured, Hiccup?"

He brandished a black arrow. I stared at it.

"But I didn't get hurt; Toothless protected me from . . ." I reached to touch my shoulder pads. The arrow must have pierced the thick leather but not broken through the skin.

Gobber brought the arrow close to his bright eyes. "Outcast design. Soaked in a poisoned toad's juices and left to roast over a fire. The toad's usually alive when he's speared; the Outcasts stay awake to hear its dying croaks."

"Eww!" The smaller Viking children said; they had gathered around us with trembling fascination. The bulkier boys pronounced their disgust with hidden glee. The smallest girl had her toy lamb wrapped around her neck like a coat. She sucked on the moth-eaten fur.

"I'm not saying it's a nice thing." Gobber tucked the arrow carefully behind his ear. "There's a reason why we leave the Berk toads alone; there are some depths that Vikings don't stoop to, no matter the cost."

I had to agree; Alvin would be the type of man to sit around a campfire, chugging bitter ale and laughing as a toad struggled on a spit, croaking feebly as its skin burned to black shrivel. My dad had his faults, but even as a dragon-slayer he would never kill a creature so that it lingered for miserable hours.

"Well, isn't that a nice sight?" a crackling voice jeered. Gobber turned to glare at the old man grinning at us from the top of the hill. "Our Dragon Conqueror can't keep his precious Toothless safe from mere Outcasts?"

"Shove it, Mildew," Gobber said, frowning at him. "Vikings get hurt just by being Vikings; the same can happen for dragons." He reached down with two hands to pick up my dragon; it was startling to see Toothless not even protest.

"Is he going to be okay?" I asked, running to keep up with Gobber's stride.

"Nothing a little Gobber medicine can't help," he answered cheerfully. Several of the women followed us, carrying baskets of leaves. The girl with the lamb stayed behind.

"What does Gobber medicine involve?" I asked between jogs. It wasn't that I didn't trust my dad's second-in-command; Gobber just liked to beat down problems with an iron ax or bellows. Those methods were useful when treating dragon teeth or forging swords, but not with medical emergencies.

"Oh, just pulling out every arrow and rubbing him down with yarrow." He explained, grunting under the black wings. "Standard treatment for Outcast arrow victims; we can do the same for Toothless and you."

"For me? Gobber, I didn't get hurt! Toothless-"

"Yeah, you told me; Toothless protected you from the worst of the shots. Get the door, will you?" I rammed the door open so that Gobber should move inside without disturbing Toothless. He laid my dragon on the table and spread his wings.

"We can't take any chances, Hiccup; toad poison can kill you if it goes untreated. Toothless would be dead by now if any arrow had hit his underside. You're going to need a new outfit for dragon riding."

"What? No!" I placed a protective hand to my shoulder pads. "Gobber, I can mend the hole; you taught me how to sew."

"Yeah, and I'm teaching you how to play doctor," he remarked dryly, taking a small surgical knife and marking incisions around the arrowheads. "We don't have to burn your clothes yet, but Stoick will have my heart for dinner if he finds you wearing them. You always keep a spare set in the smithy anyway; get dressed in those clothes and come so I can examine you."

He had a point there; I sighed, stripped off the shoulder pads and protective riding wear, and went to get the spare shirt. I heard Toothless moaning as Gobber and the Viking women worked to wriggle the arrowheads out of his thick hide.

3. Chapter Two

****Thank you for the kind words! I'm glad that you all appreciate the story.****

****Risuchan0223- Glad you like! "Dragon Conqueror," was written to satisfy my impatience during episode hiatuses, but it pleases me to know that other enjoy it immensely.****

****ClassicBubble- In that case, I'll keep mentioning you! Toothless gets first-aid in this chapter!****

The bellows hummed like a dormant bear as I reached behind the tongs for the green tunic dangling on the wall. When I was littler, Gobber had taught me the first rule about making weapons: always have a spare outfit. His clothes were decked with burns and scorches from flying sparks, and mine had suffered no less.

The tunic was snug around the chest as I pulled it on; little threads were snapping. I made a face and kept pulling it over; it wouldn't budge. Must have been ages since I had left it on the hook, since the last dragon attack.

When I resurfaced with new clothes, Toothless was still moaning. His eyes stayed shut, although the lids twitched. Each Viking woman cut around a single arrowhead before teasing it out of the skin. They would then wipe down the area with a soaked cloth and Toothless would grunt. The surreal sight held me.

"You can gawk later." Gobber used his hook hand to hoist my shirt up. The sleeves tore. "Well, all for the best," he said, cutting a slit of shoulder off to examine the intact skin. "No flint for you, but you'll need yarrow. Doctor's orders."

The cloth made a wet slap as it hit my skin, but I did not flinch, although I made a face at him. A saccharine smell clung to the air.

The door banged open behind us. Four pairs of boots tromped in.

"We just took on five Outcast ships!" Snotlout burst out, striding in like a triumphant bull. "Guess whose dragon landed on one and set the whole thing on fire?"

"The same Viking whose dragon lit their trousers on fire," I commented.

Snotlout stopped swaggering. His pant bottoms were smoking slightly. He gave a sheepish smile and stumbled to the bucket where we cooled swords.

"It was a masterpiece," Tuffnut and Ruffnut said at the same time. They rubbed their fists and punched each other. "So much wood burning and you missed it."

"They've gotten more accurate catapults." Fishlegs was talking rapidly; his face was streaked with sweat. "Also lots of poison-tipped arrows; Meatlug got dizzy from all the spinning."

Astrid was pounding her fists on Spitelout, the older Viking carrying her. "For the last time, I'm perfectly fine! Put me down!" A chunk of her braid had been chopped off and there was a large scratch on her right cheek.

"Astrid! What happened?" I ran towards her and Spitelout.

"Alvin the Treacherous aimed most of the catapults at her and Stormfly," Fishlegs replied. Astrid shot him a death glare; he continued nervously. "He grabbed her by the hair and tried to pull her to the deck, but Storm snapped her away to safety."

Astrid gave a huffy roar. Fishlegs backed outside. Spitelout put her down and held her as Gobber rubbed the damp across the scratch. She winced as the yarrow juices did their work.

"Where's my father?" I asked, looking among them.

"Having fun with some Outcast prisoners," Snotlout answered from where he soaked in the bucket. "His dragon Thornado managed to pick up a few of the scrawny ones, so he's interrogating them to find out why they're attacking in the daytime."

"Yeah, you gotta see." Tuffnut and Ruffnut grabbed me by the shirt and ran outside. Astrid broke away from Gobber to punch me.

"OW! Astrid!"

"Do you have to fly Toothless by yourself every morning?" she gestured at my prone dragon. "None of us knew where you were! Your father was very worried!"

"Astrid, I was fine; it was Toothless--"

"You could've been killed and no one would have known!"

"We're Vikings; dying anonymously is an occupational hazard, Astrid."

She grabbed me by the front of my too-small shirt. "You promised you wouldn't scare me anymore."

"I promised no such thing, and I wasn't hurt."

"Don't tempt me to change that," she replied, pulling her free fist back.

Ruffnut and Tuffnut tried to pull me away.

"Guys, stop it!" I said. "It's going to-"

There was a loud ripping sound. Astrid pulled back with a large piece of cloth. Ruffnut and Tuffnut had my shirt sleeves.

"-tear," I finished.

"Eh, you're not the first Viking to go shirtless." Gobber approached us. He wrapped a strip of clean gauze around my bruised shoulder. "Good way to attract the ladies with a war wound, and to show your father you've been treated." He clapped me on the shoulder and made shooing gestures at the others. "Now all you get; we have a sick dragon to take care of. Go knock your heads together or something."

Ruffnut and Tuffnut led the way into the bright sunshine. The torchlight had made my gaze bleary, so it took time to adjust to the glare. A loud sound cut through the bustle and left everyone fleeing the scene. I listened.

"That's not my dad," I said in wonder. "My dad is not-"

"Singing the saga of Siegfried and Brunhilde off-key, in three-part harmony?" Fishlegs finished. "What better way to torment our godless enemies?"

"I can't listen to this," I said, but my feet kept moving to the source.

"No one can listen to it," Tuffnut supplied. "That's the point."

4. Chapter Three

Dad's off-key singing seemed to curdle the air around us. Terrible Terrors squeaked in accompaniment. The larger dragons had fled to the Academy; good thing Toothless was locked inside. Tuffnut and Ruffnut only took their fingers out of their ears to punch each other quickly. We approached the mead hall.

"This is awful," I said in a fascinated voice. My father could sing well, but he had even made an effort to abandon his heavy Scottish accent so that his voice came out as haunted and brooding.

"I'll say." Astrid winced, covering her scratch. "It scares Vikings because they fear Thor striking down the singer with lightning."

"Like any of us really believes that will happen," Snotlout scoffed. Dad then launched into Siegfried walking into the Ring of Fire to wake Brunhilde, screeching high notes. Snotlout covered his ears and shut his eyes tight.

"Odin forgive us, Odin forgive us, we mean no disrespect," Fishlegs was muttering under his breath. I rolled my eyes and marched closer to the mead hall, which was shaking with choir.

"Dad?" I called. The singing broke through Brunhilde's declaration of love. Then it stopped. Large hands opened the door.

"Hiccup!" My father towered over me. He had a stern, anxious expression that darted to the bandage on my shoulder. "Where in Thor's name have you been? And what happened to your arm?"

I lifted it. "Astrid happened. An Outcast arrow hit the shoulder pad but not my actual shoulder."

Dad did not look amused. He took in the absence of an outer shirt and a sweaty face.

"Should we keep singing, Stoick?" A woman called from inside. "They don't come any close to breaking."

I reached down to pick up a Terrible Terror. It snapped but stayed put. Dad looked skeptical as I handed it to him.

"They really like music," I said, keeping my tone neutral. "They were outside screeching to the accompaniment. Maybe the Outcasts will talk."

A mischievous grin crossed his face. He gave the Terrible Terror an appraising look; it wriggled in his arms. "Not a bad idea, Hiccup. After all, what could strike more fear into the hearts of our enemies than our Dragon Trainer teaching dragons to sing?" He opened the door to bring the little dragon inside.

Before the wooden doors shut, I caught a glimpse of three men tied to chairs. Their skinniness struck me; few Outcasts lacked the bulk needed to take down my father. The men had the same rebellious spirit.

"That's your boy, isn't it, Stoick?" one of them called. "You'd be better locking a paltry treasure in your house than letting it wander."

There was a crack from inside; Dad must have punched the guy in the chin. My horrid fascination with the bad singing faded.

"Come on. I need to go to the Academy," I said, turning away. "We may as well see if Terrible Terrors can be trained to cry when Brunhilde kills Siegfried."

Astrid touched my arm. I flinched, but her gesture was affectionate

this time. "We found a Wanted poster on the men," she said. "Your father was furious when he found it."

"Vikings? Reading?" I shook my head as we walked. "That's hard to believe."

"It had some pretty important information." She mimed holding a piece of paper and reading aloud. "'Who can conquer the Dragon Conqueror?'"

"Here it is," Fishlegs provided from within the folds of his shirt. "I saved it before Stoick could tear it up."

The paper was greasy and thick, a cheap vellum dampened by the sea breezes. It had an accurate likeness of my surprised face, painstakingly rendered in charcoal, and the slogan that Astrid had mentioned. There was also a drawing of a sheep and a basket of fish with runic numbers drawn beside them.

Fishlegs and the twins hung back, the twins being uncharacteristically quiet.

"Oh come on," I said, staring at the runes. "It's 'Dragon Trainer'. I TOLD Alvin it was Dragon Trainer."

"'Who Can Train a Dragon Trainer' doesn't sound as impressive to most Vikings," a new voice commented.

We jumped. Gobber was behind us; he must have run to catch up with us before we hit the Academy.

"How's Toothless?" I asked, turning around.

"Resting his injured body; we're going to try to feed him Sleeping Soup with fish bits so the wounds can heal."

I made a face; so did the others. Sleeping Soup was a bitter, sticky substance that more often than not ended in the outhouse than in your stomach. At least we had been given small doses; Toothless with his body weight would need a full tankard.

"Your father wants to see you, by the way," he told me. "Something about a Wanted poster."

5. Chapter Four

**Hi all! For those wondering, the chapters are slow-paced because I was making up as I was going along with them, to an extent.
**

httydfan95- Thanks! It's fun to write the whole gang interacting over one problem and their different reactions.

**Guest- When I wrote the chapters initially, I thought Toothless had six legs. Several people on deviantart quickly corrected me. **

Dad stood in the door of our hut, drumming his foot. I stopped when he looked up.

"Hiccup. Come in." He ushered me inside and closed the door behind him.

"Dad, if this is about Mildew's roof, I've had dragon patrols checking it. We've kept the Gronkles and Terrible Terrors from roosting-

He cut me off with a two-armed hug, lifting me off the ground. The wind in my lungs escaped to the safety of the hut.

"Thank Odin you're not hurt," he whispered fiercely. "I wouldn't say this in front of the others, but thank Odin. Alvin was boasting about how he had shot you down."

"Dad," I gasped, "I can't breathe."

He put me down. I took steady breaths.

"Tell me how Toothless got shot."

It was an abbreviated prologue to an epic tragedy. The fire flickered in the corner. Dad walked and poked the embers with his ax.

"It's worse than I thought," he said. "A great madness has fallen on the islands."

"Did you get any information out of the Outcasts?"

"Not until we beat it out of them; they didn't fear divine wrath. Alvin has been going from village to village with that Wanted poster, recruiting Vikings to capture you."

"What?" I stared at the vellum crumpled in my hand. "Why would a Viking ally with an Outcast?"

"Alvin doesn't say he's an Outcast," Dad remarked, "and when he can't pass for heroic, he has one of his smaller men go in. It's not dishonorable to challenge a Viking to a duel, to prove your strength, and Alvin's always had a gift of tongue. He can persuade them that three ships armed with catapults cannot meet the match of a Dragon Conqueror on a Night Fury." Bitterness colored his Scottish accent. "It's how he convinced your mother to go on her final quest and why I had him banished."

Silence settled between us. We never talked about Mom, even though she was a great Hero. She had died on a distant island, so there was no grave to visit or boat to honor.

"He already took her away, and I'm not letting him get you." Dad clenched his fists. "Until Toothless is better, I want you to stay in the village, in plain sight. Alvin's boat has been burned down, but he has allies with bigger boats. I don't want you wandering on your own into the woods while they're out there. The madness should fizzle out when they see our Dragon Army."

"Dad!" I exclaimed. "I haven't been by myself since I trained Toothless, and we know the woods better than our enemies."

"The problem is that enemies keep learning." Dad reached for a small wooden case. "I know dragons don't like weapons, so keep this

concealed." He handed me a small blade.

I stared at the hunting knife. "Dad, I can't. I almost killed Toothless with a knife like that."

He closed my fingers around the sheathed blade. "It may make all the difference if an Outcast grabs you. Promise me you will carry this and use it when in danger."

Promise me. That was a loaded order, for I had made a promise to my dad once and spent my life with Gobber's bellows. It had taken years to break that oath, and ounces of willpower.

"I promise." I said with gritted teeth, "but when Toothless is better it stays in the house. I'm coming with you when the next wave of attacks hit. I can ride Stormfly with Astrid."

"No. You'll ride with me on Thornado. Alvin seems to have it in for Astrid as well." He clapped me on the shoulders. "For now, I want you to get some rest; you came back late from the Academy last night and you need your strength."

"Dad, I still have the morning chores--"

He gave me a stern look, one that clearly said not to cross him. "I'm not leaving the house until you are sound asleep. The others can surely handle the chores."

"Sure," I drawled, "Ruffnut and Tuffnut can handle the fertilizer squad and Snotlout will tussle with Astrid over who teaches the next Dragon Academy session. Mildew surely won't try to frame the dragons in the three hours I'm asleep."

"That's not going to work, Hiccup; Mildew would have to be really stupid to frame the dragons when we need them."

"That didn't stop him from doing it once."

"Upstairs. In. Bed."

There wasn't a choice; my dad stood in front of the door watching me. I backed up the stairs with a sullen glare. Kind of a shame that I missed the ax lying in the way and tripped on it; that ruined the effect. Dad started laughing, but it was small consolation.

6. Chapter Five

****Hey all. First chapter with a cliffhanger here, but the next one will be up tomorrow. PM me if you'd like more chapters being posted per day since I'll be away from the Internet next week.****

****Stratoc- Thanks so much! That was the intent when writing this story, about what I felt should happen next in Riders of Berk. Glad that you liked Stoick's bear hug and everyone being in-character.****

When I woke up, the fire downstairs had dwindled to smoldering embers. Night had draped Berk like a thick, moth-eaten quilt that a one-eyed grandmother had knitted.

I rolled in bed, trying to recall the unsettling dream I had. My hand clutched the hunting knife Dad had given me; if it had lacked a sheath, I would have born scars. The metal leg clanked. Toothless! I had to check on him, to see if he had missed me. I tiptoed out of bed, not sure if my father was home. Slipped on a spare shirt drying over the fire, one of Dad's burlap tunics. It sagged to the knees.

The torches had gone out outside; I could barely see my hands in front of me. The mead hall glowed with oily torches. Dad's voice came out muffled from the hall.

I grimaced and walked away.

In hindsight, I should have immediately gone to the mead hall, where my father was undoubtedly impressing the consequences of helping the Outcasts and devising a strategy by means which to understand siege. It was the only lighted building, and people would see me there.

A part of me quelled against his orders, however; even in the days of dragon raids I had enjoyed my freedom, able to sneak off to the woods and have a quiet space where axes and curses didn't cut through the air. With Toothless, the alone time was important since the Dragon Academy duties took up much of the daylight. You couldn't think when chasing dragons from the laundry or writing down Gronkle statistics, and you couldn't think with other Vikings shouting at you.

I liked my freedom, and tonight would be the last night of it. Dad said I had to stay in the village, but he wouldn't enforce the "plain sight" rule till morning.

Bird-sized footsteps. "Hiccup? Is that you?"

I stopped. "Who's there?" The knife shot out, by pure instinct.

White wool stepped out of the nearest shadow. The girl with the large lamb peered.

"It's me, Hiccup."

I searched my brain and put away the knife. Victoria . . . Ingrid . . . Ingie. Lamb-girl Ingie, the one whose parents had fretted since Alvin the Treacherous has last invaded Berk. Lamb-girl Ingie who wouldn't let go of her toy, not even in practice combat.

"Can I talk to you, Hiccup? It's important."

"Shouldn't you be in bed, Ingie? The sun has already gone down."

"Can't sleep." Her teeth gnawed on the fraying white wool. "Need to ask you a question."

I sighed. "Walk with me. I'm going to visit Toothless."

Ingie wasn't a chatterbox, but she needed time to speak. We walked slowly and, against my better judgment, I let her words enthrall me.

"People have been saying that my Lambie is bad luck, that he brings monsters to Berk. Alvin wouldn't have gotten you if Bucket hadn't gone back for my Lambie. Is that true?" Her eyes were wide, but she was holding back her curious tears.

"No!" I spoke louder than intended. The wind rustled around us. "Ingie, there is NO such thing as bad luck. Who's been telling you that?"

"The other kids. My parents. They think I should put my Lambie away so you'll be safe."

"Those kids are half-trolls." She giggled. "Ingie, your lamb is not bad luck. It's just . . . how can you even carry him? He must be twice your body weight."

"I'm stronger than you think. All the girls are," she said, wrapping her lamb around her. There was a cute, vicious quality to the image that distracted me from the rustling behind us.

I opened the smithy door and let her enter first. Toothless growled when he saw the knife in my hand; his back was covered in foul-smelling plaster. I placed the knife in Ingie's hands and went to scratch Toothless under the chin. There was a puddle of Sleeping Soup spreading under the table, the tankard knocked over. Gobber had placed the bloody Outcast arrows in a squat barrel in the corner.

"Your Lambie isn't bad luck. It's like . . ." I turned and placed her free hand under Toothless's chin. "Scratch him for me, will you? He likes that."

I scurried to the back and grabbed an old device on wheels. It squeaked as I brought it closer to the door. Toothless growled but remained lying.

"Gobber thought this automatic bola was crazy, not Viking enough," I said, "but it's accurate over long distances. It's how I met Toothless."

Ingie's eyes grew wide. She kept scratching.

"I don't dislike this bola gun, because without it I never would have bonded with a dragon, but it also hurt him in the process and nearly led to me killing him." I paused and stroked the splintering wood. "Your Lambie's like that, Ingie. It's not good or bad luck. It just is what it is."

"I think I understand." She unwrapped the Lambie from around her neck and placed it under Toothless's head. "So it's not bad luck."

"Alvin was searching every nook in Berk. He would have found me anyway."

"Ay, that's right," a different voice chuckled.

Toothless's eyes shot up. The door banged open as three Outcasts strode in. They were armed with shiny axes and coarse sacks.

I stood up, shielding Ingie from them. Her little fingers tightened around the knife. We backed beside Toothless, who made an effort to stand.

"Why don't we make things easy," the tallest Outcast said, tightened a long cord between his hands. "You and the dragon come quietly, and we don't hurt the girl."

"My father will be coming to bed soon," I said calmly, backing Ingie towards the barrel. "He'll notice you three gone and attacking the smithy."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that; Stoick's gone soft. He thinks mere singing can scare us." They chuckled.

"I'm going to create a distraction. Run and get my father," I whispered to Ingie.

"What about you?"

"I'm used to this," I lied and raised my voice. "Toothless, fire at will!"

7. Chapter Six

****And the cliffhanger from the last chapter is resolved here while paving the way for new conflict.****

****Stratoc- The best part of being a writer is when you keep the reader guessing. Thanks again for reviewing!****

The smithy rattled when Toothless let off three mauve fireballs. I wobbled back and forth but Ingie remained steady. The meek look had disappeared from her face; she curved the hand with the knife.

"Good dragon!" I said. Toothless grunted and tried to stand up. "It's fine, Toothless; just keep firing and roar at the top of your lungs."

He shot me a look as the men got to their feet.

"Trust me." I reached for the automatic bola, punching the panels open. A tangle of rope and rock shot out. The first man who stood up found himself beamed in the head, and he went down. Toothless growled disapprovingly between shots and gestured to me with his head. I shook my head and backed towards the barrel.

Ingie's right hand flew forward; the knife spun in the air. Perhaps the taller man would have grabbed it if he were upright, but Toothless's fireball had knocked away his balance. The blade slid between his eyes with a sickening squish.

There was a paralyzing pause. The third man already had recovered his axe and something webbed in his hands, but he even turned and gaped as his companion slumped to the ground like a mannequin.

Toothless gave a screeching roar and broke the spell. Then he charged.

From the distance, people emerged from the mead hall; they looked like helmet-wearing figurines. Dad jumped on his dragon with a hard landing. Astrid had two fingers in her mouth, whistling for Stormfly. The other Vikings charged toward the smithy, axes and hammers drawn.

Not registering that he was surrounded, the third man threw the black web in his hand. That snapped me out of my stupor.

"Ingie, run now! Toothless, look out!" I ran forward, but Toothless couldn't twist away in time. The net encased him from head to tail-fin, and he crashed to the ground. I skidded to a halt beside him, slipping a sharp edge out to cut him loose.

"All the better that it's between you and me," the third Outcast grunted, advancing forward with his axe. "Means I won't have to split the sheep."

"Hiccup!" Ingie shouted. "Catch!" Something heavy and fluffy sailed through the air and caught the axe blow. I held it with two sweaty hands as the man tried to shake his blade free.

"What is this? A large toy?"

My metal leg stepped on his foot. He yowled, only to yowl more when an Outcast arrow slipped out of my shirtsleeve and ended up in his arm. I released one hand to pull the arrow out and stab him again.

"That," I said, reaching around to bloody his other arm, "was for shooting down my dragon. This is for threatening a little girl." I couldn't emphasize my words with punctuated blows, but it was enough to see his face twisting in pain. I let my metal leg crash into his kneecap, shattering it. The sound echoed against the walls.

He sank to the floor, making a wild grab. He wouldn't have gotten me if I hadn't been wearing Dad's drooping shirt, with the ends sagging. I yelped as he pulled me down with a hard thump. Toothless roared from where he was trapped, but his struggles were feeble.

"Hiccup!" Astrid's voice became louder as she and Stormfly approached the smithy.

"Alvin said you were a tricky sot, but you're not so tough without a dragon," he said, climbing to one knee to pin me by the legs. Blood ran down his thick sleeves.

"You're not so smart without Alvin telling you what to do," I retorted. "You realize an entire Viking army is going to storm the smithy and you can't outrun them with a bad knee."

"Escaping them will add to the legend of conquering the Dragon Conqueror." A crazed, agonized look entered his eyes and he grabbed my arm. "Your father won't dare attack if you're my hostage."

"No," I agreed, looking away, "but my girlfriend would."

Spines shot from above; the man flew from me, pinned to the floor. He screamed but couldn't move; Stormfly had aimed well.

"That's my girl." Astrid patted Stormfly and came forward. I flinched as she bent down and offered an arm. "Are you hurt?"

"No, thanks to you and Ingie's lamb. Will you please not knock me to the ground?"

"With your father watching? Of course not." She gave a smirk that faded as she helped me up. "Your father's cutting Toothless loose. Did you kill that man?"

"No, Ingie did." I indicated the girl being hugged by her parents and scolded. "She's stronger than she looks."

"What's that white stuff?" Astrid bent down to pick up fur.

"That's from her stuffed lamb. I used it to . . . " I took in all the fluff on the smithy floor. The Outcast's axe lay beside the prone lamb; it's soft belly had burst open from taking the fatal blow.

"This is why I never clean the smithy every day." Gobber marched forward. "You never know what mess will ruin the neat image." He was trying to make us smile, to ignore the corpse and bound man.

Toothless also marched forward, limping in pain. One of his cuts had reopened, but he didn't seem to notice it.

"Ingie, I'm sorry about your lamb." I walked to her, bent down and gave her a tight hug. "You and he saved my life tonight."

"It's all right," Ingie said quietly, turning to watch the fluff drift with the evening breeze. "He died a hero."

8. Chapters Seven and Eight

Hm, seems we're in for another short chapter. So, I'm going to combine this section with the next (Chapter eight) so as to satisfy you dear readers.

**For those wondering, Ingie was the name I gave the girl from "Alvin and the Outcasts" who asked Bucket to get back her lambie. Her cuteness stuck with me **

**Stratoc- Ingie has to be deadly and adorable; she's a Viking. I couldn't write her any other way. **

Doomsday Beam- Neither did Hiccup. That was quick thinking and a heroic sacrifice on Ingie's part.

Ultimato- Thank you; I have never heard of Too Much Awesomeness Disease Before. Unfortunately, the story is only going to get faster, and there will be a few more cliffhangers.

Chapter Seven

The night seemed to darken, but the villagers were far from ready to settle down. Gobber gathered all of Lambie's dirtied fluff and placed him in wheelbarrow. He found a blanket in the smithy and covered the

fluff.

"We'll have a funeral for him in the morning," he told Ingie. "Give him a proper sendoff to Valhalla."

"Thank you," she said.

"Don't encourage her!" her mother said.

"She should be in bed!" Her father added. "I'm sorry she bothered you, Hiccup."

"She didn't bother me." I broke away from Astrid to approach them. My voice became terse. "She saved my life with her stuffed lamb; he deserves a proper funeral."

Ingie's parents looked shocked. Perhaps no one had ever questioned their nurturing methods. Ingie remained impassive.

"It wasn't her fault or the lamb's that Alvin the Treacherous found you on the beach that night," I continued, "You know that she's had to live with that worry for weeks, all because you called her toy bad luck?"

Astrid reached out to grab my shoulder. "They get the message. Let's go."

Ingie's parents retreated with their girl in tow. They looked rebellious.

"You might want to get that frown off your face," Astrid said.

"What look?"

"The look like you're about to slice through a man's eyeball. It's not natural."

"Astrid-"

"She's right," Gobber piped up, coming to join us from the wheelbarrow. "If you weren't the shortest and skinniest Viking around, every Outcast would be fleeing in terror just by seeing your face."

"Yeah, just like they fled in terror right now."

"They ought to, the way you defended yourself without a dragon. Maybe we need to come up with a new style of fighting. 'Hiccup combat.'" Gobber gestured with his metal arm. He kept his voice cheerful, although his eyes darted to the bloodied arrows on the ground.

Astrid looked concerned. I turned away from her face. Toothless walked with us among the armed Vikings.

My father had hopped off Thornado, his dragon. He had restrained the two Outcasts who were alive. His muscles and beard were twitching.

"I thought I told you to stay in plain sight, Hiccup," he shouted.

"Can't you follow the simplest orders?"

I flinched. Dad had once shouted those words the night I had caught Toothless with the automatic bola. We hadn't returned to those times, had we?

"It wasn't his fault, Stoick," Astrid said. She never challenged my father, not in such a calm voice. "No one was expecting the Outcast prisoners to escape."

"No, no one was." Fishlegs waddled towards us. "Logically speaking, men trussed up in an enemy village would not attempt to carry off the chief's son when they're outnumbered and lacking firepower."

Dad calmed down, but his eyes kept twitching. "Then those men weren't thinking logically."

"No, they weren't." At least we could agree on that. "The man who attacked me said that he needed the thirty sheep." An odd statement. Most families didn't need that much milk.

"We need to discuss this over mead and ale," Dad said. "That's the best way to exchange bad news. For now, we have to take care of the body and the other two men."

Spitelout had left the dead man under a moth-eaten sheet. He handed my father the hunting knife.

"That girl would make a good warrior," he said. "Clean blow between the eyes."

"Good," Stoick muttered. "That's one less worry."

****Chapter Eight****

"Why do we always blame Mildew when something goes wrong when we can't do anything against him?" Tuffnut complained. "What's the point of not beating up the bad guy?"

We were all sitting in the mead hall, huddled around large tankards. Dad had tried to get some mead down my throat, but one sip had burned my throat. Astrid had pushed her tankard away, but the other were chugging theirs down. Fishlegs had poured his share down Meatlug's throat. Ruffnut had already fallen asleep after downing half a tankard. Her braids had hung from the dining table.

I could see why Dad wanted drinks to go around; scouts had returned from the vacant hut from where the Outcast prisoners had escaped. They had held slashed ropes and hard expressions.

"Someone cut the Outcasts loose." Dad had viewed us, muscles quivering. "Someone also provided them with a net that could catch an injured Toothless."

Toothless had groaned on hearing this. Gobber had sat him by the fire and was sewing his reopened wounds.

"That explains why it was metal and not standard rope," Fishlegs had said. His dragon belched. "Generally we don't use metal for fishing nets because of rust."

"Ay, that I've learned the hard way." Gobber had snapped the thread with his rock tooth. Toothless had grunted. "But making a net of that size is a waste of time and metal; you know I wouldn't make something like that."

"I've always trusted you, Gobber," Dad said. "Hiccup wouldn't make a sharp-edged net either, and you two are the only blacksmiths on the island."

I gave a sarcastic cough. "If I were just a blacksmith, Dad, Alvin the Treacherous wouldn't have put out that Wanted poster."

"None of the Outcasts we carried off the ship had a barbed net either," Astrid commented. She kept her hands folded. "We stripped them of weapons before tying them up, and they only had axes."

"That could only mean one thing," Dad said, putting his tankard down. "The same person who cut the Outcasts loose provided them with the net. We have a traitor in our village."

"But who would betray the chief's son to Outcasts?" Snotlout asked, wiping his mouth. His eyes had turned blood red. "Who would be brave and evil enough to risk death?"

I had raised my tankard at the same time Astrid did, as did Dad. Gobber had to make do with his bone needle.

"Mildew," we said, clinking in morose unison. Toothless growled after we clinked metal. That's when Tuffnut had asked his whiny, drunken questions.

"I never thought I'd say this," I said, "but Tuffnut's right. Mildew has tried his best to get rid of our dragons, but he never leaves behind proof. There's no point in accusing him if we can't secure that evidence."

"But would he try getting rid of you?" Astrid asked. "We only think it's him because it's always him, but would he risk your father's wrath and execution?"

"Well, let's see." I ticked off a finger at a time. "He framed Toothless for blowing up the armory, which left us defenseless to the Outcasts, and we know that he tried to give me up to Alvin before you knocked him out."

Dad straightened. "WHAT?"

Astrid shot me a glare.

"You didn't tell my father that Mildew tried to identify the Dragon Conqueror?"

"It didn't seem important at the time," she said with gritted teeth, "and you gave yourself up anyway."

"It doesn't matter," Fishlegs said, saving the situation. "He'd just say that he was thinking of protecting the hostages, and that the Outcasts wouldn't believe that the hiccup of the tribe was a dragon conqueror. He could probably make a career out of making logical

excuses."

"Odin help us all if that happens," Dad replied. He leaned back. Ruffnut snored against his elbow.

"We need to find out which villages Alvin is approaching," I told him. "If we can cut him off before he can recruit more soldiers, then maybe we can reduce the amount of potential invaders."

"Not until you can fly your dragon," he said flatly, "and we'd need to visit dozens of villages. Our best bet is to attend the next Thing, since that's coming up in a week. We can convince the other chiefs that if their men want to fight the Dragon Conqueror, they fight honorably and fairly."

"That is reassuring," I said under my breath.

"And until then?" Snotlout asked. "Will we get to burn more ships?"

"Unfortunately, yes." Dad looked at me. "You only leave the village with me and Thornado, Hiccup; they wouldn't dare attack a Thunderdrum or myself in tow. Astrid can lead the defense brigade against more Outcast ships, and you can come up with battle strategies at the Dragon Academy when not accompanying me on chief duties."

I hid my sullen look by peering at my nearly-full tankard.

"Hiccup can also create new weapons in the smithy, and Astrid can help him develop a fighting style." Gobber came and grabbed my mead, downing it in one gulp. "Toothless, stay by the fire. It's good for your limbs."

Toothless mimicked my sullen look but lay down. I went to sit by him and examine the stitches.

"Why can't the rest of us help Hiccup?" Tuffnut asked. "I love clobbering things." He gestured and spilled ale on the table. Ruffnut's snore came out as a snort.

"Because I'M the best fighter in Berk," Astrid reminded him. "Besides, you wouldn't know when to stop hitting."

"That's what helmets are for." He grinned with crooked teeth.

"This is ridiculous," I said. "Astrid, you may be the best fighter, but the Outcasts are twice our size. I only got lucky with the one who attacked me, but none of them are going to wait for a lamb to fall in my hands."

"No, but none of them expect you to be a threat without a dragon," she pointed out. "You need to be prepared if they separate you from Toothless."

Toothless growled at her. The flickering flames made his slits for eyes look more threatening.

"I'm with you, bud." I scratched his long ears.

"You don't a choice in this, Hiccup," Dad said. "Size doesn't make a

Viking; skill does." For the first time a smile entered his face. "It was amazing what you did with that metal leg. Imagine what more you could do."

It was my turn to glare at Astrid and lay my cheek on Toothless's warm, shiny scales. She pushed her tankard towards Snotlout, and I saw the scratch on her face more clearly. That's when my glare disappeared.

If the Outcasts kept coming, then Alvin would do anything to get his hands on me. I couldn't let Astrid get in his line of fire.

9. Chapter Nine

I wish I could say that the next week improved with Dad's security measures, that the Outcast prisoners provided no trouble, and that despite my skinny stature I quickly mastered hand-to-hand combat and impressed Astrid. But no, Odin wanted to throw every physical challenge at me. He started with Astrid and finished with Alvin.

Yes, Alvin attacked again. But a week passed before he invaded, a week filled with marvelously tedious and painful surprises. Astrid seemed content to kick me to the ground because pain is the greatest teacher. She actually said that during our first session.

"When you're given room to scar, your body learns." She leaned on her knee after knocking me down.

"Have you been taking lessons from Gobber?" I asked, flat on the ground. She offered a hand. "What exactly are you trying to teach me?"

"I'm studying you," she said. "You're left-handed and left-footed, so you always attack my right side."

"Thank you for telling me what I already know, Astrid."

She let me fall. "Why can't you attack me like you attacked those men? Why can't you see me as the enemy?"

I started and crashed. A horrid expression twisted my face.

"Hiccup?"

"Nothing." I shook my head. Astrid never dreamed about dead men dragging her into the hellish Underworld; she wouldn't understand.

"Let's try this again." She pulled me up with a jerk. I sidestepped to avoid her fist.

Toothless watched us with beady eyes. He knew that Astrid wouldn't hurt me, but his protective instincts didn't; from time to time he would pace and surround himself with fire.

"Stubborn as a boneheaded Viking," Gobber had told me in the morning, drenched in Sleeping Soup. He had cajoled and threatened, but

Toothless had refused to take the medicine. "Your dragon's not going to rest well tonight. I'm off to change my skivvies."

I had tried to tell Toothless that I would take the Sleeping Soup with him, that it wasn't as bad as it tasted, but he had stalked off. Dragons often had good reason for doing things, but I wasn't sure what could be worse than wrestling with Gobber.

"Hiccup, hit me."

"What?"

She gestured with her fists. "Try to take a punch."

"Astrid, I don't hit girls." Especially not my ax-swinging girlfriend.

"I just want to see how you make a fist," she said. "You won't actually hurt me."

"I'm not worried about that," I told her, making a half-hearted fist. She caught it easily.

"Keep your thumb outside of your fist," she said. "Otherwise it will get sprained."

"Or lopped off with an axe."

"We can't start with you swinging a weapon. You need to know the basics that your father neglected to teach you."

"That wasn't my fault," I told her. "Dad stuck me in the smithy when I was old enough to wander; he thought I would get killed in my first battle."

She let go. "He was probably right, with those muscles."

I tried punching her again, this time with the thumb out. She caught my fist and smirked.

"Good, but you need to aim for the nose. Get angry, like you were last night."

"Astrid, if I get angry I could hurt you."

"Dream on; you hit like a smoked eel."

My left leg shot out. She sidestepped the kick and tripped me to the ground.

"Better."

"If Astrid kills Hiccup, do I get his stuff?" Snotlout asked. He patted Hookfang's next. "Owning two dragons would earn me a place in the Hall of Heroes!"

"Astrid, go for the head!" Tuffnut called. "He needs to see stars!"

"Yeah," Ruffnut chimed in. "That's when you get the happy, dizzy

feeling."

"Don't you guys have guard duty?" I asked them, Astrid's foot on my chest. "You're supposed to be patrolling the island shores in case Alvin attacks again."

"Fishlegs is covering for us," Snotlout called. "We have all day."

"You could search Mildew's house for evidence," Astrid pointed out, "and make sure the new Outcast prison is well guarded. Meatlug also can't cover the entire island by herself."

"What's the point? He's smarter than the rest of us when it comes to getting rid of our dragons," Tuffnut said.

"Yeah." Ruffnut sighed. "I'd rather watch Hiccup's butt getting kicked."

I sighed. "Toothless, will you do the honors?"

My dragon's eyes lit up. So did the wooden bleachers where Snotlout and the others were sitting. They yelped.

Astrid picked up an axe and pointed it at them. "Go before Stormfly attacks."

"Okay, we're going!" Snotlout hopped onto Hookfang and took off. So did the twins, although they turned around to see if Astrid would hit me again.

Toothless chuckled; he looked happy for the first time. Astrid took her foot off me and let me get up.

"Finally, a bit of privacy," she said, putting down the ax. Her arms came forward, but not to attack as I thought; she pulled me forward for a kiss.

I'm not going to describe Astrid's methods because some things should not be written down. Besides, she killed the moment by breaking away.

"How about this?" she said. "For every session you attend and put in a full effort, I give you a kiss like that."

Toothless watched us with full attention. His ears perked up.

"Astrid, you already know what I'm going to say." I turned away, pressing a hand to my warm mouth. "But don't ask me to hit you again."

"No promises." She grabbed the front of my shirt and pulled me forward. I didn't protest.

10. Chapter Ten

**And here's the last chapter to be updated for a week because family is going on vacation, probably with no Internet access. After that,

regular chapters will resume.**

Stratoc- :) Maybe it's like a serial published daily, so that one receives excitement in small doses rather than all at once.

**Doomsday Beam- Oh, Hiccup hasn't killed anyone yet. Ingie killed that Outcast; Hiccup just broke a kneecap so far. **

"All right, first session done," Astrid said. "What's next on your list?"

"Saddle-making," I said, heading toward a spare dragon cage. She followed me, as did Toothless.

"Hiccup, wasn't the Saddle Squad a disaster? Except for you, the rest of us ride bareback."

"That's what worries me," I said. "I only developed the saddle so that I wouldn't fall off Toothless, but none of you have the same protection from Alvin." We also didn't have the weeks that I spent perfecting the saddle and stirrup that controlled Toothless's tail; Alvin could attack at any time.

She watched me choose a heavy saddle with a horn attached to it. "Wait, that's the one Gobber had me try on Stormfly."

On hearing her name, Stormfly marched over. I grunted and shifted the leather monstrosity onto one knee.

"Technically, this one was fine, Astrid; the horn just made Stormfly panic. I can remove it." I marked a line through the black leather, "Then I can attach a harness so that you won't fall when dodging catapult rocks."

"Hiccup, the saddle's fine." She took it from me and placed it on her dragon. "Why would I need it anyway?"

"You're second-in-command at the Academy, Astrid," I said. "If anything happens to me, you're the only Viking who can handle the dragons and their riders."

She stopped smiling.

"Alvin also seems to have pegged you as a target, even if he hasn't put a bounty on your head." I moved to unstrap her saddle. "Toothless already got hurt protecting me from him, but--"

"Hiccup, I'm a Viking. I can handle an Outcast," she said. "Besides, you're the chief's son. It's a bigger deal if Alvin gets his hands on you than if--"

"Maybe a bigger deal to my father, but not to me," I said flatly. The saddle sank into my arms.

We walked. Stormfly nuzzled Astrid, so I left the two of them. Toothless ran to catch up. He limped.

"You know you're going to have to take that Sleeping Soup," I told him. "Gobber says you can only heal if you get enough

rest."

Toothless made a face with his tongue. He nudged with his head so that I didn't trip with the saddle's weight.

"Yeah, I know," I said. "We'll find some way to take it without throwing up."

"Hiccup! You're not supposed to go alone into the village!"

I sighed. "Astrid, I'm going to the smithy. Surely my dad won't object to a five-minute walk in broad daylight?"

"He might after he drops off those Outcast prisoners," she said, hopping onto Stormfly. They hovered. "At least let me watch you from above, so Stormfly can attack anything that tries to get its hands on you."

"Fine." At least she hadn't gone overboard like the rest of the village had that morning.

My father had never looked grimmer, lashing the living Outcast prisoners together and using Thornado to carry them. The dead body lay next to him, wrapped in a white shroud. With the sun rising, he gave a tremendous, threatening silhouette.

"I'm going to send them back to their villages," he had said. "We've treated their wounds but can't keep them here."

"It's not like we had a choice," the taller Outcast had replied as Thornado's claws tightened around him. "We would have left you alone if Alvin had let us. It was nothing personal."

Dad had taken off before I could respond, and Ingie had dragged me to her lamb's funeral. For an oversized toy, it had commanded a notable crowd at the cove. Bucket had painted the wheelbarrow so that it resembled a stern, youthful Viking ship. Gobber played a mournful tune on the panpipes.

"I remember that lamb," Bucket had whispered, taking Ingie's hand in his. "Such a brave little toy, facing Alvin the Treacherous and his men."

Mulch had looked annoyed but rolled the wheelbarrow into the bay. Toothless had let off a plasma blast and the wood went alight. Ingie had turned away. Gobber had let the panpipes die on a long note.

"We have to thank that lamb for many things," he had said. "For starters, for allowing me to buy a new wheelbarrow. The left wheel was always crooked and leaned to one side."

Mulch had looked ready to punch Gobber, but Ingie had managed a smile. Bucket had then walked her back to her parents' house. The flames had flickered against the pink morning.

"It's really nice that you all showed up," I had whispered to Mulch.

"Oh, we're only here to keep an eye on you and Toothless," he had whispered. "Chief's orders."

"You can't be serious."

"Hiccup, you have a reputation for finding trouble, and your father has a reputation for getting angry." Mulch had given a somber grin. "After all, we wouldn't want the lamb's sacrifice to have gone in vain."

The wheelbarrow had sunk into the bay, leaving white fluff in its wake. The gods must have savored the perfect timing.

A groan had escaped my throat. "My father better find Alvin or trouble may just find me."

11. Chapters Eleven and Twelve

****And we're back, after a week of vacation! Here are two chapters meshed into one so that you get your dose of backstory and Berk characters bouncing off each other!****

****Stratoc- It is a cute funeral, and a sign that things will take a sharp turn away from cute . . .****

****Doomsday Beam- Hiccup isn't a killer by nature, so it would be difficult for him to change his tune now. :wickedlaugh:****

****Looking Up- Thanks so much! ****

Gobber sat by the smithy door. He was comparing Gronkle incisors to Thunderdrum fangs, having removed both from Meatlug and Thornado earlier.

I tried to sidle by. Toothless peered at the rotten teeth with curiosity, still limping.

"I'm going to see how the others are doing!" Astrid called. Gobber looked up and saw what was in my hands. His face twisted into a frown.

"Thanks, Astrid," I muttered.

"Ah, back in the saddle business aren't you?" Gobber asked sarcastically. "Hope you're not going to scratch my nice leather."

I winced and tried to back away. Toothless sensed my discomfort.

Gobber got up with a bloody tooth, looking almost demonic with his pointed helmet. Toothless's ears went flat, and his eyes became yellow slits. Gobber, however, only clapped me on the shoulder. I dropped the saddle.

"Just messing with you, Hiccup." Gobber bent to grab the leather. "A man has to accept failures as a side dish to main course successes. Where do you want me to put this?"

"In the backroom," I said. "It's going to be a rush job."

"Ah, trying to help your lady friend." He gave me a knowing wink.

"Astrid will be happy to know that you can service her."

A blush sprouted between my freckles. "It's nothing like that; Astrid and I aren't . . ."

"And you shouldn't be," he said with genuine sternness. "Not until you're Chief at least. Goodness knows, neither you nor Astrid are ready to settle down with little ones."

I shuddered at the thought; Gobber placed the saddle on a table and stood back. Toothless marched in, circling Gobber warily. A covered pot bubbled over the fire.

"If you ever want to talk about it, though, I know your father won't broach the subject," he said. He wasn't joking.

"I'd rather talk about something more savory," I said, cringing. Gobber teaching about what goes on in a man's pants? A good reason to play hooky.

"And what would that be, young Hiccup?"

"Alvin the Treacherous."

His expression hardened. I made incision marks on the saddle with charcoal pencil.

"Gobber, he's our worst enemy but I've never heard a thing about Alvin. All I know is that he's an Outcast, he tricked my mother into getting killed, and he's after the Dragon Conqueror. Also, he hates my dad."

"We don't talk about Alvin because he's an Outcast, Hiccup." Gobber spoke slowly, as if I were a toddler again. "We don't want to remember the Outcasts, or give a reason to talk about them. Time then erases them from history and legend, and they don't become heroes or infamous villains."

"What about Mom, then?" The charcoal pencil jabbed into the leather. "Dad never talks about her either. He brought back her armor but didn't give her a proper Viking burial."

"Valharrama the Great was not an Outcast. How could you even suggest such a thing?" Gobber went to tend the pot. "No, your father doesn't talk about her because he blames himself for her death. It's also the same time you came to the smithy, so he feels bad that you didn't get proper upbringing."

"But he gave me her helmet; that must count for something." Never mind that the helmet had been made from her breast-plate, eurgh.

"Ah, probably." He took off the pot lid and offered a ladle to Toothless. Toothless's eyes dilated and he bounded to hide behind me. "Come on, how much dragon nip will it take to make you eat?"

* * *

><p>Chapter Twelve

Gobber and I made a deal; in exchange for devising a Sleeping Soup that Toothless would swallow, he would tell me about my mother, Valhallarama the Great. Toothless didn't look amused.

"Think of it this way, bud; the sooner we find a potent formula, the sooner you'll be flying," I told Toothless as I rubbed dragon nip against his snout. He crumpled to the floor with reluctant pleasure.

The first thing I had to do, however, was remove the horn from Astrid's saddle. Gobber when sewing had made miniscule, hard-to-find stitches, and I couldn't use a typical knife. Much as Astrid claimed to not care about it, she wouldn't be happy if the local smithy's apprentice scratched her weaponry.

"Here, use this." Gobber placed a long Thunderdrum fang in my hand. "The tip's narrow so an army of them can snag a school of fish."

I slipped the tooth under a minuscule stitch. It snapped, but the leather remained unscathed.

"This could be useful," I said. Toothless rested his heavy head on my lap. "Hold on, bud; I'll get you more nip in a moment."

"I have dozens of spare teeth." Gobber's eyes twinkled. "Dragons lose them like I lose socks. You could practically build a new kind of dragon with them, if the edges don't slice through your fingers."

"That wouldn't be a problem with metal links to guard them." The fang sagged in my free hand as I tested its weight.

"Oh, you mean like chain-mail armor?" Gobber threw his head back and laughed. "That would a sight; chain-mail and dragon teeth! You'd have to find a way to attach the links through the teeth, after telling everyone that you're not a sermonizing knight."

"Maybe there is a way," I said to myself. "Maybe there is."

Dried dragon nip and chin scratching encouraged Toothless to curl into a scaly ball and rest, even with his stitches.

"Maybe you should stop trying the Sleeping Soup and simply give lots of nip to Toothless," I said. "He's practically asleep now."

Gobber slapped a palm to his forehead. "Overthinking does tax this brain. Once I get more nip from the garden, I'll tell you about your mother." He walked out.

"Typical," I told a prone Toothless. "Trying to get information from a Viking and all you get is delay. No wonder Loki had to keep tricking the other gods in Valhalla."

Toothless warbled peacefully. I sat back down and went to work.

For an engaged blacksmith, the sun can rise and fall and the person working inside wouldn't know, not if a project occupied his hands. I adjusted Astrid's saddle, painted a white skull on the front for good luck, and switched to metal.

First, connecting dragon teeth to chain links. Gobber had been right about one thing: forging metal links to make a net was a waste of time and metal. After making three little rings and connecting them, I threw them in the cooling bucket. Toothless kept sleeping.

"Whoever made these had plenty of time of their hands," I said. Gobber had kept the Outcast net and cleaned off the blood; it gleamed from where his spare shirts hung. I got up, pulled on thick leather gloves, and carefully removed the barbed wire from the hangers.

Up close, the sharp metal ends appeared threatening like Monstrous Nightmare claws. I took pliers and unwound them, setting them in a barrel. The net draped like an innocent curtain, flowing onto the table. I could poke three fingers into each link, but not much more.

"You seem to be making progress, using what our enemies provided." Gobber lumbered him, arms loaded with a fish basket. He set it beside Toothless, who purred and snuggled against the grass.

"If they do the work for us, I may as well." I doubled up the net over the bellow, so that the links overlapped. "Now tell me about my mother."

"Hm." Gobber chewed on his long mustache. "Valhallarama the Great was tall, blond, and buxom. She liked holding things to her chest, whether they were soft and cuddly like you or big and brawny like-

"That's not the kind of information I meant," I spoke sharply. "How did she meet my dad? And why did she go on a Quest after she had me? What did Alvin tell her?"

"Well, every muscular Viking wanted their hands on your mother, just like every guy on Berk goes after Astrid," Gobber said. I groaned but made no effort to cover my ears. "Your father happened to be the chief's son, so he scared of them off with old-fashioned fighting. I only met her after they married, so I had no chance. Only one man didn't fear your father, and Valhallarama loved him deeply."

"What?" Despite myself, I turned from the fire to listen. Toothless rolled to one side.

"Aye, Humongous the Hotshot." Gobber grimaced. "Tall and blond like her but muscular and stupid in the right places. He was a traveling Hero who dropped by to help with Dragon-Slaying. When he saw your mother swinging an ax at a Gronkle, though, that's when he dropped anchor and said he wasn't going anywhere."

I hammered on the metal. If I were as stupid as Humongous- who had either a dragon's courage or a troll's apathy to challenge my father- I would attempt to meld the teeth to the links and watch them fall later. Instead, I grabbed the Thunderdrum fang and split the net in half.

"Stoick couldn't say no because Humongous was a famous Dragon-Slayer and he was a help in those days." Toothless stopped purring. Gobber petted him. "Apologies, Toothless. So Humongous would strut around the island with Valhallarama, offering tokens that he had picked up

on his travels, and Stoick couldn't do a thing about it. His blood boiled, and he punched rocks at times. Humongous was honorable in his courting, even if he hit on Berk's best girl. Stoick did the best he could, slaying Monstrous Nightmares to win her affections, but Valhallarama turned a blind eye."

"So what happened?"

"Alvin happened," Gobber said. "He wasn't Treacherous back then, just Alvin of Berk. He got rid of Humongous so that Stoick could win Valhallarama over."

"What? Why?" This seemed at odds with the way my father's face hardened every time someone mentioned the Outcast.

"Alvin wasn't a nice guy or Stoick's friend, but he wanted the future Chief to owe him a favor. That way, when the next chief's son came along, he'd have some influence."

"But he got banished after I was born. How did he kill my mother?"

"Now that I can't say, given he's an Outcast." Gobber came to view my handiwork. "I CAN say that Valhallarama had some inkling of Alvin's scheme and wanted you to stay out of it. Your parents weren't stupid, you know, not like Humongous, but they were honor-bound. Alvin wasn't."

"Come on, Gobber, there's a reason Dad put me in the smith before I had the chance to mess up up his perfect village."

Before he could answer, we heard war horns. The smithy walls muffled them, but the deep blasts made the water buckets shake.

"Thank Thor for timing! Another attack!" Gobber exclaimed. He then saw my face. "You should get the Dragon Academy's finest; I'll lead the defense on land. Good thing we restocked the armory." He bounded over to the nearest pile of weapons and lugged it.

Toothless opened his eyes. He made a motion to get up.

"Stay here, bud," I told him, pouring more dragon nip on his scales. "You need to get those wings healed before fighting enemies with arrows."

Worry mixed into his swollen, glazed eyes.

"I'll be fine, and we'll be flying soon." I scratched his chin. "You already saved my life out there, twice; I can't ask much more of you. We'll do sky diving like old times, bounty or no bounty. How does that sound?"

He closed his eyes and bumped his snout against my gloved hands. I toppled the basket so that the dragon nip blanketed him.

12. Chapter Thirteen

****And we finally have some action as more Outcasts invade Berk and how Hiccup's friends mount a defense.****

****Stratoc-** Glad you like the story! Currently I'm also updating the HTTYD Easter Special, which takes place after the season finale, so that's another fic to check out. And yes, I wanted to keep this Alvin close to book Alvin's character and backstory, with the tricky plotting and all because it has a different implication if applied to the television series.**

****Doomsday Beam-** I like it too, but you'll have to wait. If you want to see Hiccup being truly violent, he kills a few Outcasts in the sequel, "How to Court a Dragon Prince." That's on my deviantart account if you want to skip ahead. Though he makes the attempt in later chapters.**

Sunset had hit Berk like a rotten berry, staining and darkening the cloudy skies. Gobber wheeled his array of axes and swords with gusto, a veritable metal caravan in the village. He tossed a sword at Spitelout, who also picked up a newly carved shield.

"It's good to be back in the blacksmith business!" Gobber shouted with enthusiasm. Then Ingie and some of the taller Viking girls ran past him. He then noticed that his smaller hatchets were missing. "Hey, where are you going?"

"The dragons need to burn the ships down!" Spitelout called. "That way the Outcasts will be forced to land, and we need all viable hands to subdue them!"

"Seems a bit risky!" Gobber called back. "What with them all trying to get their hands on Hiccup, you may as well be asking for an invasion."

Spitelout doubled back so he wouldn't have to shout himself hoarse. "Chasing them off isn't an option; we need to find out if more ships are coming and take hostages for future assault." He caught sight of me. "Hiccup, all of Berk serves as your shield. We need you to stay safe. Stoick's orders."

"You know I'm not good at doing that."

"Find a warrior and stay with him. Or her." He tested his axe's sharpness. "With me, Gobber. We're going to need lots of axes."

Gobber rolled his cart of weapons, keeping pace with an unburdened Spitelout.

Astrid flew down with Stormfly as I lumbered toward her with the saddle. The sun glinted off her cracked hammer, and she wiped sweat off her face.

"Let me put this on. What do we have?" I panted, placing the leather against Stormfly's blue scales.

"Three Outcast boats, filled with catapults and crossbows," she said. "Snotlout and the Twins are baiting them; Fishlegs is analyzing their weaponry. Wait, what are you doing?"

I swung a metal foot over the dragon's back. "This is a good time to test the adjustments."

"Hiccup, your father made us swear to protect you! Fighting the Outcasts will put you in their line of fire!"

"Astrid, they're coming after me anyway." I tightened the saddle straps and offered both hands. "I trust you and the dragons more than I trust the ground."

Her expression changed.

"Besides," I continued as she clipped herself to the saddle, "we rode like this to fight the Green Death. This can't be much worse."

* * *

><p>Rotten berry sunset melted into dismal, Sleeping Soup darkness; Thor must have refused to storm such an occasion. Fishlegs and Meatlug careened as Astrid and I flew past him. The Gronkle's normally satisfied, dreamy gaze had spun into muddled torpor.<p>

"Hiccup, they're aiming for the dragon riders!" he cried. "Crossbow arrows are serrated, rocks blunted for cranial damage." He yelped as helmet-sized rocks shot past his ear.

"Never mind; I think I preferred fighting the Green Death," I muttered to Astrid, fingers clenched around her saddle's side straps.

"It's a little late for that now!" she shouted; Stormfly took us for a spin as a barrage of rocks shot past us.

A spyglass slipped out of my sleeve; I placed it to my eye. "Where are the twins and Snotlout?"

"Down there!"

Ruffnut and Tuffnut looped around the boats; they dove back and forth from the boats, setting catapults alight. The water echoed with gas clouds and their high-pitched giggles. Snotlout went for the direct approach; he darted above the main ship and tossed hammers at the Outcasts. He was running out of hammers, though, and Hookfang left swathes of flame on the blackened decks. The Outcasts in turn swung axes and tossed torches at him, although they needed the light as the sun dimmed.

"Snotlout, stop firing!" I shouted, yanking away the spyglass. "You're going to hurt someone!"

He shot into the air. "We were told to burn the ship. What am I doing wrong, oh mighty Dragon Conqueror?"

"The one in green's the Dragon Conqueror!" Someone shouted from below. "Get him!" The crossbows were loaded again, and nets appeared in the Outcasts' hands. Astrid glared.

"When we get them off the boat, Snotlout you are going to wish you didn't have a tongue."

"Oh, like it's my fault that Hiccup keeps wearing green; I always

thought he should go for standard grey-

"Guys, focus!" I interrupted. The crossbows went off with reverberating plucks. All the dragons turned sharply to dodge. I rocked back and forth against Astrid. "Aim only for their weapons so that Hookfang's shot limit isn't wasted, Snotlout."

"Hookfang doesn't have a shot limit," he boasted. Hookfang opened his mouth to fire at the approaching arrows; the flames dried up. "Okay, maybe he does. Yahh!" He shielded himself, and Hookfang dropped out of the way. Stormfly incinerated the arrows.

"Hiccup," Astrid reached back to grasp my shirt, "They're coming for us."

"Yes." My sweaty fingers wouldn't unclasp from her saddle. "Gobber's saddle was made for one-

A smooth boulder caught Stormfly in her blind spot; she screeched and went down. Her wings opened to stabilize, and Astrid remained strapped in. The blow, however, had knocked me off the dragon; I twisted in the air.

"HICCUP!" Astrid tried to calm Stormfly as the rocks arrived like hailstones from the ground.

A yell snaked out of my mouth as the suffocating waters came closer. The Outcasts were yelling louder, however.

"Get those nets! We need the Dragon Conqueror alive!"

Suddenly the hard water seemed more appealing. I braced myself. Don't show fear when they catch you.

The twins dashed forward; their Zippleback's long necks outstretched. Belch's jaw emitted gas as it caught me by the shirt. He then flicked its necked and flipped me between their riders.

"Got him!" Ruffnut shouted triumphantly, punching me.

"Only we're allowed to mess you up," Tuffnut said. "Let's take out those catapults."

13. Chapter Fourteen

****And here we see how the battle plays out. Hiccup takes a leap of faith and attains victory, but at a high price.****

****Stratoc- Thanks! And yes, it was a close one. Good thing the twins were paying attention.****

****Mec- Thanks! I love the twins as well, hence why they get their moments of humor. No comment on my age. ;)****

The Outcasts kept firing; seeing me topple had spurred their arrows. Belch and Barf dove into the clouds, where no one could see or hear us. Stormfly followed; Astrid nudged her to halt. Hookfang spun in, while Fishlegs coaxed Meatlug into stability.

"What exactly was the plan before I showed up?" I asked.

"Keep them from landing until the ship's burned; that way they can't escape."

"Well, we've succeeded at that. They're not going to focus any of their attention on the mainland now that I'm in the air." An idea came into my head, a painful one. "We can use that to our advantage." A catapult stone shot past us.

"Hiccup, are you offering yourself as bait?" Astrid looked incredulous.

"Hookfang's shot limit won't recover for a while, and Stormfly's the only Nadder in our bunch. The Outcasts are smart, but they don't know how to fend off water attacks." I paused. "You need to sink the ship from below, without them noticing. Fire into the water to create a steam cover before diving. Then, capture as many Outcasts who attempt to swim for shore; we want them completely disarmed for interrogation."

She set her mouth into a thin line. "And what if they catch you while we do that?"

"You won't let that happen. None of you will."

Stormfly twisted her neck to meet Astrid's eyes. Astrid patted her dragon's neck and met Snotlout's eyes.

"Let's swim."

In different circumstances Snotlout would have jumped at the opportunity. He let Hookfang drop silently into the background.

"Everyone, fire into the water around the ships!" I ordered. "We need to create cover for Storm and Hookfang!"

The twins' dragon was only too happy to do so. A stream of explosive green hit the water and made it sizzle like witch's brew. Stormfly did the same.

"Now what?" Tuffnut asked.

"Remember playing Mjollnir in the Middle as a tyke?"

"EVERYONE's played that game," Ruffnut said. "That's where you toss hammers. Why?"

"I'm going to be Mjollnir, you're going to be the Frost Giants," I said. "Actually, your dragons will."

Comprehension hit Fishlegs's anxious eyes. "Are you sure you want to do this, Hiccup? Your arms could get dislocated, and Meatlug can't fly that fast."

I stood up on the Zippleback. "How fast can she drop?"

Ruffnut made a grab, but her greasy fingers only grasped thin air; I had already broken through the clouds. Fishlegs shrieked.

Steam blanketed the ships, and there were cries of confusion. The water rippled where Stormfly and Hookfang had entered the dark currents. Catapults fired, but not in orderly fashion. They didn't want me brain-dead, after all.

Thick claws wrapped around my shoulders. I heard the rocks reloaded onto the catapults. The spyglass slipped; I twisted to catch it.

"You're crazy!" Fishlegs shouted. "Diabolically, mentally unsound!" He swerved to avoid arrows.

"Toss me to the twins!" I shouted back. "Before she loses her grip."

The Gronckle's claws curved upward, and I spun into the muddy darkness. Mjollnir in the Middle was a catching game, named after the myth where Thor lost his hammer to the Frost Giants and watched them toss it around like a sheep's bladder. He had gotten it back, of course; Thor always does.

Moonless wind swirled past my spinning figure as Belch and Barf caught me. Rocks now shot in haphazard spurts, as did bolas. They didn't even bother with crossbows. In the past, I had often played the role of Thor, running back and forth between the other kids trying to grab the hammer. Then Gobber would swat me to the smithy before the blunt end landed. Even though I was playing the part of the sheep's bladder in this case, it felt good to finally serve a purpose in the game.

Zippleback claws were small and pointy, meant for holding onto narrow ledges. They couldn't hold on for long, so the twins threw me to Fishlegs again. I held out my arms like a traveling trapeze artist and grabbed Meatlug's legs. The shouts and gasps increased from blow. They lit more torches.

Rocks and jets of flame filled the air; when one dragon didn't have me, the other incinerated the weapons aimed at us. Quite abruptly, the weapon stopped firing when the gurgling sounds started. Fishlegs wheezed with horror.

I looked down from Meatlug's grasp. Stupid but necessary; the steam had faded into the night air. Two ships had broken apart in the water. Wood drifted like puzzle pieces.

The thrills pounding through my chest faded. I waved a free hand at Fishlegs. "Pull me up. I need to see."

Fishlegs's arm was too short to reach mine; Meatlug attempted to roll over to reduce the gap. I grunted and pulled myself onto the Gronckle's back. She straightened upright. I placed the spyglass to my windburned eyes.

A large rope net draped between Stormfly and Hookfang; they scooped up the drifting Outcasts and tied them in the net, as if they were the daily catch. The few who had escaped the nets found armed Vikings waiting for them on the beach. Our torches illuminated metal and . . . blood. Clanging metal and grunts filled the night.

The spyglass dropped onto Meatlug's back; Fishlegs grabbed it and looked. His fingers were shaking.

"Spitelout said we were only taking prisoners." My voice gained an odd tremble. "They're getting slaughtered, those twenty Outcasts. Did they refuse to surrender?"

Fishlegs didn't have an answer. At his nudging, Meatlug descended into the calm air.

"So who won?" Ruffnut asked. She and Tuffnut floated down with hysterical giggles.

"Totally me; my dragon had control of the claws," Tuffnut bragged.

"Oh come on; it's split in the middle. Hiccup was riding with me the first time!"

"Tell that to my dragon head! He knows who won."

I sighed. "It's a tie. Your dragon gets extra fish tonight, as reward for protecting the Chief's son."

We descended slowly; the somber mood spread to the twins as we heard our men cheering. Fishlegs tried to pat my arm with three fingers.

"The point is we won, Hiccup."

"Maybe." My tone became emotionless. "We don't tell my father about Mjollnir in the Middle. He'll freak."

"Agreed," my three friends said simultaneously. The dragons nodded, even Meatlug with her blank smile. Another figure swooped from the sky, cutting us off.

"No, we won't be telling your father about your desire for cheap thrills," Dad said, settling between the twins' dragon and Meatlug.

14. Chapter Fifteen

****Second big cliffhanger in this chapter, so be warned.****

****Stratoc- Thanks and yes, it was funny to have Stoick swoop in after seeing Hiccup do a dangerous stunt.****

"Hiccup, what were you thinking?" Dad asked as we dropped onto the stained beach. Spitelout was waving at us.

"I was thinking of sinking the Outcasts, using any means possible," I replied curtly. Fishlegs looked up with alarm and even the twins showed surprise.

"Hiccup, are you sure being the hammer didn't get to your head?" Ruffnut asked. "When I get dizzy I get those grumps."

"I don't have grumps. I'm angry."

"Aren't those the same thing?"

Meatlug crashed onto the sand. I hopped off before Dad could stop me. "Spitelout!" I called. "You said we weren't killing anyone!"

Squishy obstacle tripped up my metal leg. Hands flew forward, but they landed on sticky flesh. I gasped as my knees collapsed against a limp limb. It was still warm, covered in salt and sweat. Red stained my tunic. A horrible sound slithered from my throat.

A strong hand; Dad pulled me up and forward, through the beach. Thornado flew above us, while Fishlegs and the Twins went ahead. Fishlegs didn't have the stomach, but the Twins' Zippleback perhaps realized what had happened and remained discreet.

My father had the grip of twenty Night Furies; if it weren't for the pile of corpses lying on the beach, glistening under the torchlight, I would have thought he were dragging me for interrogation. But he looked concerned, seeing how neither leg would move through roadblocks of human hands and fallen heads.

"I'm sorry, son."

"We had to do it," Spitelout said when we reached him. He sported a bandage on one arm. "When a man comes charging at you with an axe, you strike first. We thought you were still on land, and when you were in the air they stopped invading. Anyway, there are still hundreds that we have spared, thanks to your dragons."

Dad let me find my feet. I touched the red stains on my tunic. "Did you offer them the chance to surrender?"

"Aye. They said 'no, thank you.'"

As if they could hear the conversation, the Outcasts tied in the net started to shout again. One reached a skinny hand through a twine hole and threw.

"Look out!" Dad shoved me out of the way and caught a sharpened blade. It nicked his palm. "Who threw that?"

"I did," a pert voice answered from within the net. A young face was pushed forward. "It's your son's fault that we're out here trying to catch him."

"That is a circular argument," I said. Dad managed a sour smile. "How is the invasion my fault?"

Blond boy, dirty eyebrows, and hints of a beard at the corners of his mouth. The net framed his bitter expression. "You've tamed dragons only for Berk, but not for the rest of us. The dragons burn down our food. Alvin the Treacherous took the rest, only giving it back if we hand you over."

"What? Alvin's been taking your food?"

"Don't listen to him, Hiccup," Spitelout said. "He's playing to your sympathies; they all do that."

"I'm trying to feed my village," the boy went on; he was actually my age, and I could see the flesh pressed into his cheeks and divided sparingly along the hairline.

"Spitelout, can I borrow your torch?"

He handed it to me. I doubled back along the beach, where the dead bodies were. I crouched and shined the torch over their faces. Horror settled in like ague.

"You're just kids," I said in a whisper. "You're my age. What did Alvin say to you?"

"They could be lying, Hiccup." Dad placed a hand on my shoulder. "They may be young, but they've injured ten of our own."

The glassy eyes of one teenager reflected the torchlight with swirls of orange. I winced and traced my left arm around the thin rib-cage. Then I felt for another's raking bones.

"He's not lying, Dad. They were all starving."

He yanked me up by the shoulder and led me away, before I started examining every body. The first boy's glassy eyes kept staring.

* * *

><p>The prisoners had to be cut out of the net, and then we got a proper look at them. Although they bore the Outcast flag, none of them had the bulkier build that Alvin's men displayed. In addition, most of them had their ribs showing, and stale bread lumps fell from their pockets. Spitelout looked more uncomfortable as I asked if they could be fed.<p>

"I don't think they deserve it," he told me in an undertone, "considering they were trying to knock you out of the sky."

"We don't have to give them the best cheese and ale," I replied. "Just feed them a decent meal before we have to send them back."

Astrid and Gobber stripped the hundred prisoners of weapons, feeling down the sides of their clothes for concealed weapons. When she got to the boy who had thrown a knife at me, she grabbed him by his dirty shirt collar.

"Threaten my boyfriend again, and you won't be able to walk for weeks."

Stormfly hissed in agreement. He looked shocked as she pushed him away. Perhaps he was wondering how a scrawny runt like me had ended up with the best female warrior in the village. Sometimes I wondered myself, what with Astrid's punches and axe-swinging.

They sat on the nets littering the ground, quietly accepting the bread and smoked fish offered to them. With Dad watching, I sat with them, eating nothing, listening to their troubles.

"Alvin said you were a selfish egomaniac who only cared about dragons," the boy with the knife said while stuffing his face. His

face turned red from the effort.

"His name's Alvin the Treacherous," I said without any trace of humor. Humor would destroy him. "He always lies."

The fight seemed to go out of the teenagers. The blond boy looked even sheepish as he took a second helping of cod. A few adults sat sullenly, but none were Alvin's men. I checked their faces to make sure, and Dad talked with the oldest. He found a Chief quickly, talked to see if the boys were lying about the food shortages. He looked as troubled as I had when he found they weren't.

* * *

><p>Dad flew me back to the village, away from the morose festivities involved with locking up prisoners. They hadn't looked willing to attempt a second strike anyway, but we couldn't take chance.<p>

"It's the Dragon's Nest again," I said as we landed outside the smithy. "Alvin's run out of recruits, so he's extorting the poorer villages to work for them. They don't have a choice, not if they want to feed their families."

"The Thing won't be enough then." Dad looked troubled. "We should visit these villages and see if Alvin is hiding there. Maybe we can stop him recruiting more Vikings, cutting off the serpent's head before it can bite."

"What a wonderful idea, Dad." The smithy door was open; I strode in. "Absolutely original considering I told you the same thing yesterday. Bud, how are you doing?"

Darkness. Withered silence. The pot over the fire had disappeared, and the fire had died down.

"Toothless?" I walked over to the bed of dragon nip and felt around. What had been left was crushed into the floor, or it had been burned to dried ashes. "Toothless, are you hiding? Bud?"

My metal leg slipped over a slip of paper. I pulled it from under the scraped prosthetic. With no light, whatever was written didn't make sense, so I had to take it outside.

"Where's Toothless?" Dad asked when I came out, eyes squinted at the vellum.

"Probably at our house," I said automatically. The moon shone like a relentless spotlight. "He's probably expecting extra helpings of haddock and wanting to regurgitate it on my lap. . ."

"Hiccup?"

The moon shone mercilessly on the paper. Outcast Skull, emblazoned in red at the top. When unfolded, the paper bore a crude message. Dad bent forward to read the thick runes. Thornado saw the skull, and his eyes flashed.

A DOWNED DRAGON IS A DEAD DRAGON. COME QUIETLY AND HE MAY LIVE.
ALVIN.

"No," I whispered, then pushed away from Dad, calling for my dragon at the top of my lungs. The vacuous evening echoed with my sprinting footsteps.

15. Chapter Sixteen

****Wow, a lot of strong responses to the last chapter, and for good reason!****

****Stratoc- Thanks, and I agree. Poor Toothless, indeed.****

****MEC- Two reviews! :D I'm always happy to reply. And feel free to go crazy and violent, it's just that Alvin may be harder to kill than one may think. So far nothing serious will happen to the twins, so don't you worry.****

****johnnylee619- The teens shouldn't, but Alvin has quite a gifted tongue. He could probably paint Hiccup as a selfish monster if he chose the right words. Not so much in this story, but in the sequel the other tribes will show how the rumors have affected their attitude towards Hiccup.****

The forlorn trees echoed my panting. Both feet cut into the rough path as I stumbled forward, scanning the ground for footprints, tail-marks, any SIGN of struggle. The metal leg caught on leaves but not much else. Breathing became painful.

They couldn't have gotten far; if Alvin had been in the smithy, he was still on Berk, waiting . . .

"Alvin! Don't hurt Toothless!" I cried out. The words escaped before I could bite them back.

Wings, fluttering. Sharp Thunderdrum claws, ripping through the fur vest. The ground disappeared.

When Astrid had discovered Toothless, she had been more than willing to rat me out to my dad. Toothless had then kidnapped her the same way that Dad's dragon was detaining me. Now I understood her anger and fear.

"Hiccup!" Dad's anger vibrated with his muscles. He reached with one arm to grab me. Then he turned around placed both hands on my back like starfish paperweights.

"Dad, they might be up ahead; Toothless may still be on the island-"

"And then what? You dive right into Alvin's welcoming arms and give him a kiss?" Dad did not attempt to make the remark humorous. "Toothless would not have wanted you to get caught by our worst enemy."

"Toothless wanted to join in the fight. I didn't let him." The night air entered my heaving lungs, slowing down my thumping hear. "I thought he would be safe."

Thornado hovered upwards; Dad lurched backwards. Because he kept his

grip on me, that meant that I nearly fell with him. He righted himself quickly.

"We'll find him, Hiccup. Alvin won't hurt him."

Astrid and Fishlegs soon appeared, also hovering. They looked concerned at my sweating, anxious face.

"Alvin has Toothless," Dad told them, keeping his hands on me. "Follow the path into the woods and see if you can stop him from leaving the island. I'll send reinforcements shortly."

"Didn't he just send an army in the evening?" Fishlegs cried. "When did he get a new one?"

"What reinforcements? Everyone's winding down for the night," Astrid said.

"They will come if I tell them." Dad looked stern. "They have to. Astrid, keep Stormfly out of shooting range so that Alvin doesn't grab you. Send a fire signal when you find them."

"Where are you going, Stoick?" Fishlegs asked. "Is Hiccup in trouble again?"

"Do Deadly Nadders shoot spines from their tail?" I asked sarcastically as Dad turned Thornado in the other direction. "Of course I'm in trouble! Why else would I be held down and not allowed to find Toothless?"

Astrid took a harder glance at my eyes.

"We'll talk about it later," I told her. "Find my dragon. Keep him safe."

Stormfly and Meatlug took off. Dad lightened his grip.

"You seem to be calming down. You sound like your old self."

* * *

><p>In addition to protecting me from Alvin, Dad had wanted me with him for a different reason: to figure out how Alvin had invaded the village when he was supposed to be on different islands. We started with the smithy when we landed. Dad made me go in first. When he came in, another Viking guarded the door. My father didn't need to speak orders:I was not to make another mad dash.<p>

"Alvin was probably expecting you to be here," he said as he tended the fire pit. His voice was neutral. "That's why he came here and took Toothless. The attack on the beach was a distraction, pure misdirection. With all of Berk at the coast, the huts would be empty except for mothers with their babies or Mildew."

Light crackled into gritty illumination. "Then they must have slipped past the dragon patrols this morning and hidden in the caves." The room glowed into view. "Toothless was sedated and alone. He didn't have a fighting chance."

"You wouldn't have either," Dad grunted.

The smithy's redecoration came into focus. Gobber had complained about having to clean the smithy, but he wouldn't have appreciated the walls and carts stripped of weapons. Nor would he have appreciated the missing bellows, hammers, and grindstones. Even the basket of dragon-nip had disappeared, leaving only dried remains.

"He took our tools so we can't forge more weapons, and the dragon-nip to keep Toothless calm." My voice broke; I knew what I would find next- or rather, wouldn't find.

"Then he's not stupid," Dad said grudgingly. "You've got to say that about Alvin. When he wants something done, he does it thoroughly." He took a naked torch from the Viking guarding the door and stabbed it into the fire pit. "Take this and search the other rooms."

Short trip downstairs, where my spare shirt had once hung. The spare room, MY room, had also been emptied. Alvin had left the charcoal and blank papers, but he had ripped the drawings and blueprints from the wall: automatic bola, Toothless's saddle, more efficient fishing boats, and notes I had taken on dragons that had later been copied into the Dragon Academy records. The automatic bola was also missing, splinters and all. Alvin had even taken the spare rocks and ropes meant for reloading.

The torch sagged at a threatening angle. Anguish bubbled inside me, mixing with the stitch in my side. Vikings did not wail, so there was no way to express pain. Half my life had gone into those drawings, into sketching weapons in hopes that I could be a Viking with external help. The observations I had made when scratching Toothless's neck, tumbling with him through long grass, all of them stuffed into an Outcast's satchel and ready for quick skimming.

I had never wanted to kill a man before, and the hatred terrified me.

"Hiccup? Are you okay?"

I nodded, biting my lips together. "We need to check the Dragon Academy as well. He might have stolen the records there. And Odin forbid," the thought-gears clanked in my head, "we need someone to go check on Astrid and Fishlegs. Alvin stole a weapon that could bring both of them down."

Dad's silence had never seemed more imperious. My left leg dragged on the stairs with reluctant clanks.

Activity from outside: men crowded the entrance. They blocked the harsh breeze. "We found the guards knocked out, stripped to their skivvies. The Outcasts wanted their Berk attire."

My father looked up and nearly ran into me. I yelped and backed away before the torch singed his beard. "Did you find Gobber?"

"Aye." A man with a double-headed axe gave a dour nod. "Knocked out and stashed under his cart, also stripped and shaved. His mustache has been lopped off."

"Oh gods," my father said. "Alvin's toying with us. He's saying that

he can strut in at any time and humiliate us."

I didn't comment. Gobber was proud of his braid-like facial hair; the tresses compensated for his missing arm and leg.

"The worst part is that he's probably right. We can't get blacksmith tools until Trader Johann blows back into port, so there's no way to repair weapons." Dad nodded at me. "We need to find Astrid and Fishlegs before they find him."

"Wait, I can actually come with you?"

"Alvin never goes for a clean blow to the head when he can deliver a messy stab to the heart." Dad's frown became fierce. "I'm not letting you out of my sight."

16. Chapter Seventeen

****And here we have another chapter, detailing if Alvin can use the automatic bola or not.****

****MEC- Alvin doesn't have a death wish, but he doesn't die easily. You'll see. And the twins will get their moment of awesome in the climax.****

****Stratoc- I have a rule that if Alvin ever receives a victory in canon, he gets twice as much of a victory in my fanfiction. I wrote the last chapter after seeing "Heather Report," in which Alvin succeeds in stealing the Book of Dragons; Alvin steals much more than information on dragons as a result. And thank you, this was the first moment of Dragon Conqueror that came out as powerful emotion. Yes, Gobber losing his mustaches was a book reference as well as showing how petty Alvin can be. ****

Riding Thornado was like riding a gust of spiked, cobalt wind. Dad kept me in the front, hands clamped on my shoulders in the case idiot panic took hold and I tried jumping. Good to know that my stint as Thor's hammer had proved fruitful in justifying my insanity.

Thornado crashed through the treetops; he left a trail of severed branches. I couldn't look back, but the loud rustlings marked a second trail. We may as well have been stripped naked and shouting for Alvin to get us. There was no telling my father this, however, not with the imperious expression on his face. He had set his eyes on a fixed point, and only certain words would distract him.

"No fire signal," I whispered. "We should have seen one by now."

Dad gestured and Thornado shot forward. We went in a blur; the leaves and branches became oblong projectiles. They crashed into us and tore streaks in our shirt. So did a bedraggled Gronkle, with a sweaty Viking teen.

Fishlegs gave a high-pitched scream as he and Meatlug ricocheted from us. Thornado shook his wide mouth and growled from the collision. He maintained his steady flight pattern, rising from above the forest.

Astrid approached; she clutched her shoulder with a smirk. Stormfly seemed long-winded.

"Alvin's become a lousy shot," she called. "His bolas seemed to be aimed for the stars and moon."

I released a choking breath and leaned back; Dad's stiff pose softened. Of course Alvin wouldn't be able to fire the automatic bola. He wouldn't make mental calculations the way I had. I had also thrown off its aim by punching it the night before, so Alvin would have had to use a heavy metal ruler to correct the calibration.

"Any sign of Toothless?" Dad asked.

"No." Fishlegs flew forward. "We managed to track them, but we would have seen them carrying a bound Night Fury. They traveled light, except for the bolas."

Astrid let the smile drop from her face. "I'm sorry, Hiccup; we didn't see any sign of Toothless. They disappeared into the woods."

"It's okay." I straightened up. "At least you and Fishlegs are safe; Alvin can't use you as bait the way he wants to use Toothless."

"What makes you say that?" Astrid asked.

"He was testing the automatic bola on you, along with the regular ones," I told them. "One of MY old weapons." Anger refused to stir through the relief, but it lay there like a dormant reptile.

"Do you think he could rebuild it?" Fishlegs scratched Meatlug's ear, encouraging her to stay in the air. "Whatever model he had, it wasn't accurate for Gronkles or Deadly Nadders."

"It depends on if he has a blacksmith," I answered. Dad shifted direction and flew towards the village. "If he did, then it would take only two or three days, but he would still need fire to refine the metal and shape it."

"He may not have a blacksmith, but he has our blacksmith's tools," Dad said. Thornado grunted in agreement. "We have to talk to Gobber."

* * *

><p>After a stiff drink and a change of clothes, Gobber regained his good humor.<p>

"At least they didn't take my silk undies," he told Dad and me blithely, chugging down his tankard. "The Outcasts at least left me a piece of heaven."

If we hadn't just been invaded, the rest of us would have made gagging sounds. Given the lump on Gobber's head, however, and his shorn face, none of us had the nerve or cruelty to laugh at him. We were back at the smithy, Gobber giving an honest assessment of the situation.

"It's bad but not hopeless." They had taken his metal hook, so he opened the smithy with his remaining hand. His stump jerked in the wind. "Alvin's taken all the dragon nip in the area, so he knew that it would keep Toothless calm. That gives us an advantage."

"How?" This was from me.

"Dragons are more durable than you think," Gobber said. "Toothless needed his sleep to get better, and he's going to get a lot of it for the next day or so, until the nip runs out. I doubt Alvin knows about the field in the woods, since it's out in the open. That will give him time to heal, and he won't need to be chained down."

The thought of Toothless flying so soon hadn't occurred to me. Dad's face lost tension as he heard this. Gobber clunked downstairs, shedding bits of hair.

"That doesn't change the fact that we have no means to repair weapons," Dad called down. "Not to mention that he knows how to take down our dragons with Hiccup's notes."

"That's where you're wrong, chief. See, Alvin may have thought of Hiccup's inventions and his notes, but he didn't have an actual blacksmith on him." He twisted the hook on the wall so that it came off. The brick attached to it also came out. Gobber attached the hook to his stump and gestured.

I reached into the cranny and pulled out a leather satchel. Tools spilled out: miniature bellows, hammers no bigger than hip flasks, and thread and needles. My old melding kit! Gobber had saved the first tools that I had used as a tyke, ones that sank lightly into my palm. I bent to pick up the tools with awkward nostalgia.

"First rule of being a blacksmith is always having a spare outfit." Gobber patted the hook against my shoulder; I winced. "That includes spare tools as well as spare clothes. We have a chance."

I turned and met his eyes; even though it was past midnight, sunlight seemed to spark rays into the smithy.

"Do we have spare dragon teeth?"

17. Chapter Eighteen

****And here we are with Hiccup's invention and what Stoick does to prevent other tribes from invading Berk.****

****Stratoc- You will see in this chapter. would like to spoil yourself before reading the chapter, here is a watercolor I did a part of an art trade****

The next few days got eaten up like freshly caught cod, and Dad made sure they were devoured with gusto. Before the sun even had a chance to stretch its arms over the horizon, we'd be off delivering the young Outcast recruits back to their native islands and fighting the resident overlords that held their food supplies hostage. He claimed that we would find Alvin on one of those desolate settlements, where we had to chase down rogue dragons and tame them for the liberated people, but I suspected that he wanted me away from Berk, where Alvin

had struck last. Also, Thornado left a notable impact when his scream blasted away Alvin's delegates on the islands; no one dared fire at him or his riders.

I didn't regret liberating these islands, seeing teens skinnier than I was getting their bread back, but resentment built up as the time fell away. Alvin still had Toothless, could be torturing him, and I was off rescuing people who had attacked my home. If I mentioned this to Dad, air current got lodged in his ear, and he wouldn't answer. Thornado took his side.

"It was your idea to be nice to your enemies, Hiccup," Gobber said when I complained. We had to alternate using the spare tools. "That means taking time to rescue them."

When I wasn't off with Dad in the mornings, Astrid's training sessions occupied my afternoons. Once again, not something I regretted, but she knew how to keep her boyfriend from escaping. For starters, she knew every trick I would play to evade detection. Even when she marked running courses through the vast woods, she had someone patrolling the borders in the case that I got the notion to bolt. Snotlout and the twins had learned to attend their duties, which included watching over me and patrolling Berk's coasts. Toothless missing had taken a significant toll on them.

"If Alvin got his hands on Hookfang, I would rip him in two," Snotlout had said as he landed. "And if I had time, I'd rip him into quarters and sixteenths." Hookfang had given a prolonged snort at this that nearly set the woods on fire.

Evenings were the only times I got to relax, and even then I wasn't alone. Gobber guarded the smithy with a vengeance, and I watched the door when he was at the forge. He let me work without interference, except to gently correct my hand grip or to keep me from sneaking away.

"You may not look it, but you were smaller when you started using these tools," he lectured after prying my fingers loose from the hammer. "Think small for now, like you're hiding from the Monstrous Nightmares and tugging at my wooden leg as a toddler."

I had made a face, but he was right; the spare tools were not as large as our usual ones, and they didn't fit as easily in the palm. We both had to adjust, Gobber more so because he was used to heavier appendages.

Alvin had cleared out the smithy, including the webbing that I had melded with dragon teeth. I wished a dozen sliced fingers on him and cut metal sheets into glove patterns.

Once four sheets had been measured, I welded them and added an iron link for the thumb. Dragon teeth couldn't cut through iron, although they made a valiant effort. They could poke holes through the leather cover, which is why I hammered holes into the marked grooves.

Nadder teeth worked best. Terrible Terrors didn't have fangs, and Gronkle incisors weighed heavily against the arms. Stormfly shed teeth easily, and Astrid was only too willing to coax them away.

"What are you making with them?" she asked on the second day, when I had fitted on an extra sheet of metal and installed coin-sized gears. That day she had taught me how to parry with a hunting knife and how to sidestep an attack.

"You'll see tomorrow at training," I added, fiddling with the gears. Circles had cropped up under my eyes, and a migraine throbbed, but paltry tools had made useful arms. I had shoved the papers into my boots, to hide in my bedroom later.

"You better not plan to cut me up with them, even if I seem to keep you on a short leash. I know when you'll start tugging."

"I'm not planning to hurt you," I asserted, removing the gloves. You had to be careful, choosing the loop between the thumb and forefingers, or the teeth would get you. "Most guys would love to be on a short leash, if their father wasn't holding the other end half the time."

"You know your father's only trying to protect you," she said. "Alvin hit us where it hurts, and he's still on the island somewhere."

My tone turned bitter. "So is Toothless, because with the patrols he wouldn't be able to take away my dragon by boat." I did not bang my fist on the table, because that would damage the gloves as well as my fingers, but I did turn away from her.

"We'll find him, Hiccup." Her voice became soft, soothing.

I pushed away her steady hands. "I just need five minutes outside, with no one watching me. Then I could find him."

"Yeah, and get yourself captured." She gave me a gentle punch.

"You don't know that for certain; I've been running faster, and this should help." I brandished the glove at her. A leather lining prevented the metal from cutting through the skin.

"Show me what it does tomorrow, and maybe I'll help," she said.

"You're on."

* * *

><p>Astrid had a surprise in the Dragon Academy ring. Rubbing her arms, she brandished a stuffed dummy.<p>

"Bucket helped paint it, after I had Stormfly fill his fishing nets," she explained, grabbing the arms. "I've marked a man's weak points, so you know where to strike."

I stared; Bucket had replicated the Outcast I had fought several nights ago to the minutest detail. Although the red crosses marking his groin and plexus were flat as bread without yeast, his frozen expression snarled at me. I could hear him growling about wanting the thirty sheep.

"Show him who's boss, Hiccup!" Tuffnut called from his Zippleback.

An unsettling chill emerged from my stomach. The sunlight seemed to dim to a moody gray. Toothless's wail rang pitifully, as did the Outcast's growl.

"Now imagine I'm the Outcast, attacking you." Astrid held up the burlap hands in a fighting pose. "Go for the throat-"

My left arm shot out and slashed the red X. Dragon teeth cut as a single army, grinding out when my thumb slid the necessary gear. Astrid jumped back as the dummy fell over. I breathed hard and slashed at the second red X along the stomach. White fluff spilled in generous bunches.

I was breathing hard, almost choking. My left arm was stiff, weighted down with the glove. Scraggly bits snagged on the Nadder's short, curved fangs.

Astrid approached and placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. Emotions writhed on her face, while the twins and Snotlout looked confused, even terrified. I couldn't meet her eyes.

"You look exactly as you did the night that Outcast attacked you," she said softly. "Ferocious. Protective."

The teeth slid back into their leather grooves. Terrible tremors swept over me like stormy waves.

18. Chapter Nineteen

****We're nearing the end of the story, folks. But first Hiccup has to learn emotional consequences from needing to kill.****

****Stratoc- :D, Thank you so much! I'd like to write an episode, but the writers seem to go in a different direction from what I'd want to do. ****

A kinder teacher would have led me away from the arena, sat me down with hard ale, and forced me to calm down. Astrid had her orders, however, which was to hone the killer instinct that had emerged from unholy depths. She remounted the dummy, took a deep breath, and ordered me to strike again. When I had slashed through the red marks, she corrected my pose, careful not to get cut on the teeth, and told me to keep attacking.

"You're doing a good job," she whispered. "Your father's not going to believe this."

No, he wasn't. I had decided not to kill a dragon, but Viking nature allowed me to contemplate murder. Toothless wouldn't have approved.

The twins went away to patrol, and Fishlegs came to watch. He made notes in the Dragon Academy Records, watching me with morbid curiosity as Astrid moved the dummy's arms, like she was the Outcast battling me.

"Trader Johann's due to pull in this evening," he called as Astrid righted the dummy. "I heard he's staying overnight."

"How odd," I said dully.

After half an hour, the dummy no longer resembled an Outcast but rather a sad gunnysack of wildflower seeds. Astrid and I swept it with the Academy rubbish. The brooms became tangled with white fluff; I bent to remove them. The wool rested innocently in my hands.

The setting sun illuminated the fluff blowing in the wind; some snarls got caught in my hair. I made no effort to pull them out. As we put the brooms away, Astrid started to pull me towards her.

"Not today." I gently teased her hands from the front of my shirt.

"Hiccup, being vicious isn't a weakness. It's just an acquired taste."

"It's not that," I said. "I've never felt this way, never thought I COULD kill a man. And feeling vicious while . . ." I gestured to her lips. "Well, you know, what we do, it feels wrong when I'm not feeling like myself."

"I know what you mean." She let go. "The first time I won a wrestling match, I tasted Snotlout's blood for weeks. It wouldn't go away, no matter how hard I tried."

"But Astrid, you never contemplated killing Snotlout." We walked out of the Academy, Stormfly following us like a blue shadow.

"Believe me, I did," she remarked dryly, "after he started showing up with dead flowers and fish bouquets." Stormfly's eyes lit up at the mention of fish; she nuzzled Astrid.

"But when did that feeling go away?"

"Killing Snotlout?" Astrid stopped by Stormfly's lodgings and dug into a basket.

>"Probably when I kicked his butt in dragon training."<p>

"No," I said with irritation, fiddling with my gloves. "The OTHER feeling, the uncleanliness."

"It never does. You just have to live with it, with your capacity to hurt someone else. Most Vikings call it nostalgia, wishing to go back to the days when you don't have to hurt people." She gave a harmless laugh, hand-feeding her dragon. "We're always at war with something, so we always have to know how to kill people. It's who we are, and how we survive. You're completely normal."

"I have nostalgia," I muttered myself. "Now I'm a proper Viking. Won't my dad be proud."

* * *

><p>I passed the evening as if Loki had filled me to the brim with molten iron. Gobber saw my hardened shock and said nothing as he guarded the door. I added straps to the gloves so that an Outcast couldn't just rip them off; Astrid had mentioned that little problem as I had attacked her dummy.<p>

The smithy's fire pit seemed to glow with less vigor. Gobber let me leave; I didn't even try to bolt for the woods. My legs took me to my hut, forced me to climb up the stairs one step at a time, watching for stray axes and helmets. The gloves went on the table. I buried my head in the blankets and waited for forgetful sleep.

Sleep did not bring forgetfulness; it brought me my father holding me at the top of a mountain, looking down at all the Vikings below us. They bore skeptical, suspicious faces. It was a cool, cloudy day with threatening gusts; only my father's grip kept me aloft. He spoke loud words, but I could not make them out, not until I turned my head towards him.

"And he will be one of us!" Dad spoke. His face started to melt. I gasped and wriggled, but the grip remained strong as the hands became hairier, the muscles more threatening. Dad's beard grew dark, and his voice hoarser.

"You think you can escape me, boy?" Alvin the Treacherous hissed, holding me over the precipice. I tried to scream but found my throat desert-dry. "One way or another, I'll have my hands on you, Dragon Conqueror. Why, you already know how to conquer people!"

The Vikings from below swarmed upwards as a transparent mass, merging with the greyfog, gaining skulls and losing eyeballs. Moist, seaweed-clogged hands grabbed for my legs, pulling downwards. I caught one's eye and realized they were the dead Outcasts and Outcast recruits, teen and adult corpses leering at my healthy body.

"The question is," Alvin drawled, letting them swarm, "what will you do when they conquer you?" Then he let go.

I woke up with a pair of arms wrapped around me. At first I did yelp and struggle, only to feel them as my father's, my REAL father's. The fire had gone dim, but I knew his comforting hug.

"It's all right, Hiccup," he said. "Breathe."

I buried my sweaty face in his tunic; he smelled of wet forest and ocean salt. I tried to slow down my rapid gasps.

"Astrid told me how you performed," he said. "Every man gets these nightmares, especially in times of war. I doubt anyone slept after those children invaded."

"But I haven't even killed anyone." His thick tunic muffled my voice. "I've only defended myself. Dad, what's wrong with me?"

"Absolutely nothing," he asserted firmly. "At least, nothing a bit of mead and Yak milk can't cure."

I groaned. "Please not mead, Dad; I'll throw it out the window."

"Milk and honey then." He went to heat it; I heard his boots plod down the stairs. Thick dragon feet plodded up; Thornado's flat head popped up to peer at me.

I sat up in bed and stroked Thornado. He growled with content and

concern. I placed both my hands under his large chin.

Dad brought the hot drink in an oversized tankard. It steamed and frothed. As I sipped, Dad began to stroke my hair and murmur an old lullaby, of a ghost mother searching for her lost son. Unlike when he had tried torturing the Outcasts, his voice came out clear and on-key. It rang through the hut like a freshly polished harp.

Dad had once sung like this before Mom had died, when I had barely been able to walk. Then I had been small enough to carry in his arms with ease, as if I were a fish basket. Although I couldn't explain why I liked the song, given the subject matter, it always reminded me of a calm ocean bursting with fish and sunlight. It helped me close my eyes, the taste of honey lingering.

19. Chapter Twenty

****Ooh, a few strong responses to the last chapter.****

****Stratoc-** Thanks! In Riders of Berk, they probably never deal with Hiccup having to kill people is because Hiccup has never felt the need to. Even in the season finale, when Alvin was taunting him, Hiccup simply could have had Toothless shoot a fireball from a safe distance rather than charge at him. And Stoick is distant in the movie, but I incorporated memories of my own dad when writing him. (My dad didn't sing, but he was really sweet.) ******

****MEC-** No worries! Good to have you back. Alvin won't hurt Toothless for the moment; he doesn't have a reason to with a sedated, bound dragon. And don't be sad; there's a sequel I'm writing on Deviantart to this story, as well as the HTTYD Easter special. After that, who knows?******

After my father sang, sleep came in large, dreamless doses. My eyes would open, blearily, and I would turn over as he pressed his large hand against my cheek and murmured. Even when he vanished the fourth time that I woke, I turned over and let fatigue take over. Thornado kept his flat head beneath my palms.

When my eyes opened for the sixth time, loud bangs from downstairs broke through with heavy sunlight and the smell of sizzling fish. There was the sound of wood crashing. I groaned and buried my head under the blankets.

"Hey, how long can a guy sleep?" Tuffnut asked from below. There was shuffling and Gobber's peg leg scraped on the wood.

"Hiccup's had a rough night; your job is to guard every door, not bother him."

"Why didn't Stoick give him Sleeping Soup?" Ruffnut asked. "Did he develop an allergy?"

"More likely he wanted to avoid the big trial today," Tuffnut answered. "I was falling asleep before it started."

Oh gods. I pinched my eyes shut and sat up, brown blanket still covering my head. The morning air bit like Terrible Terrors after visiting Gobber's dental clinic; a twin must have left the front door

open.

"So are we keeping Outcasts out or keeping Hiccup in? I need to know who to punch."

"You can always punch me, Ruff; I want to see stars."

"There's no need for violence unless Alvin is stupid enough to attack Stoick's hut in broad daylight," Gobber said. "Hiccup has a reputation for escaping, however, and Stoick doesn't want to take a chance while charging Mildew with treason."

"So we're keeping Hiccup like he's our prisoner." Ruffnut sounded excited. "I like this job!"

What? I pulled the blanket off and gave them a dead-eyed look. Gobber looked up. He grinned cheekily.

"Nice you see you up; your father left some porridge and fish." He gestured from where he was holding a pot over the fire pit. "I'm surprised you haven't tried to run off already."

Son of a half-troll, he was right. If I had feigned sleep, I could have done the old pillow under the blanket ploy and snuck out.

"And your father told me to be on guard," Gobber continued cheerfully. "Said you would play every trick in the book once fully alert."

The blanket fell off in a tangled heap. "How did my father charge Mildew with treason? Where did he get evidence?"

"Wow, to the point this morning." Gobber turned so that I couldn't see his face, tending to the pot. "Stoick's been scheming all this while with Trader Johann. Apparently Mildew was buying barbed nets from Johann."

"But we tried to prosecute him before, when Mildew bought those poisonous flowers." I clanged down the stairs. "What's different about this time?"

"Johann had pieces of paper writing down what Mildew was buying." Ruffnut came in. She grabbed a blackened sear of fish from the pot and popped it into her mouth; it moved when she talked. "Apparently only one tribe makes those kind of nets, and they were making it on mail-order."

"I don't know why they'd make nets on mail-order." Tuffnut reached for a piece of fish, but Gobber blocked him. "I'd rather have long underwear so I can show off my birthmark."

"Stoick ran into Johann when he was delivering the first batch of Outcast prisoners." Gobber reached out a hand to sit me down. "That's why he was so late in coming back when the second attack happened; he wanted to know if Johann knew from where those kinds of nets came. Johann then told him about selling the nets to Mildew, and keeping track of the amount."

Wow. Dad had actually taken initiative. Gobber presented a small bowl of oatmeal and crisped fish to me. I picked up a large spoon and took

small nibbles. It was scalding hot.

There was a knock; Astrid swung in with a large axe. Stormfly preened herself outside, a safe distance from Belch and Barf.

"They're going around in circles," she said with disdain. "Mildew keeps claiming that he has nothing to hide, and that he meant no harm against the chief, that the nets were to be used to protect his cabbages from wild boars."

"Come on; even Ruffnut's not stupid enough to fall for that one."

Ruffnut made a face and spat fish at her brother. He yelped.

"Ah! Hot! Get it off!" He slapped at his cheek frantically. Ruffnut laughed.

"Stoick maintains that with the Outcasts tied up in the hut, and Mildew's house being on the far side of the island, that there was no other way they could have gotten those nets." Astrid sat next to me and gave me a light punch. "You should have told me you were having nightmares."

I couldn't meet her eyes. My spoon swirled in the oatmeal.

"Hiccup, we're dating, and that means we're open with each other," she said. "If I had known, I wouldn't have pushed you so hard-"

I gulped burning fish and winced. "No, you needed to. You had your orders. And I needed to know what I could do."

"There are orders, and there's the right thing." Her blue eyes became shimmering with angry tears. "You're a dragon trainer, not a warrior. I should have realized that." Gobber handed her a wooden bowl.

We ate in silence. Tuffnut and Ruffnut wrestled on the ground, slamming each other into the wood. Gobber closed the front door when the wind became too cold. Thoughts churned in our head.

If the Outcasts were hiding Toothless, they needed a large space. They had received all the time in the world with their recruits focusing on me, and the villagers focused on guarding. If I were Alvin, I'd need two or three men to carry a sedated Night Fury because he didn't have Gobber's blacksmith muscles, and it couldn't be too far a distance in case the Dragon Conqueror actually wandered nearby, searching for his dragon. They'd need a storage space, one that would evade detection-

"We need to go to Mildew's hut."

"What?"

"That's where they're keeping Toothless." I met Astrid's eyes with determination. "He has a cellar for his root vegetables; it's large enough to hold a Night Fury and several Outcasts. We have reason to believe that Mildew has been helping the Outcasts, including giving them a hiding space right under our noses. If they find Mildew guilty, the Outcasts will have to move, and then we won't know where they are." A chill crept through my hair. "If they do that, they're

probably going to mount an assault on the hut before the trial ends, making a last ditch to get me. We can't stay here."

The silence tightened in the hut. Ruffnut stopped fighting mid-punch; Tuffnut pushed her off.

"You really think we will let you go outside after what's been happening?" Gobber asked cynically. "Alvin wouldn't just go into the village, not with everyone armed to the teeth. And you think you can fight all of us without a dragon, without hurting us?"

"I'd like to see you try, Hiccup," Ruffnut said with relish. "Tuffnut's swing has gotten weak."

My voice was low-toned but tense. "I am not going to sit here waiting for Alvin to come and grab me. He's had my dragon for two or three days, humiliated our guards, and been breaking through our defenses. What's to say he doesn't have a plan to come while the trial is going on?"

Gobber snarled at the fire. "Alvin's men jumped me once; that's not going to happen again." He stroked growing stubble.

I turned to Astrid. "Go tell my father. If you can't interrupt him, tell Snotlout and Fishlegs to investigate the area. They just have to do a sweep to see if there are any men there."

"Hiccup, we're not allowed to conduct house searches when a man's on trial," Astrid said. "Mildew could have his case dismissed."

"This isn't about Mildew; this is about getting my dragon back." I placed my bowl down. "You're the one who said there was following orders and doing what was right."

She set her mouth in a narrow pink line. I wrapped my arms around her and gave her a quick peck; she stiffened.

"Please, Astrid," I whispered. "Do it for me. And don't let Alvin catch you."

"And here is where I tell you that it's not happening," Gobber broke in. "I'm obligated to the chief to stop you from conducting such a search, and I will."

The scuffling started again; Ruffnut and Tuffnut had resumed their fight. When Gobber turned, Astrid sprinted for the door. He turned and lumbered, but she had light feet. By the time he made it to the threshold, she and Stormfly flapped to the horizon.

"You're welcome!" Tuffnut called; Ruffnut pulled him by the horns.

"Well." Gobber sat, locking eyes with me. "I can see we're going to have an interesting day. Wait till your father gets back."

20. Chapter Twenty-One

**After that peaceful break, Hiccup, the twins and Gobber are in for a rough time during this chapter. So is the rest of

Berk.**

Stratoc- You're welcome. This was written when there were only month-long gaps between episodes, so I'm glad that this is helping for the long six-month wait.

Except my father didn't return. The sun made its lazy jaunt across the sky, the twins ran out of things to fight about, and Gobber and I locked eyes. He stood by the front door like a blond bear, and I kept to the upstairs, watching for an opening. The gloves slipped under my sleeves, but I dared not use them against Dad's second-hand man and my friend.

"It's too quiet," I told myself, knowing that Gobber would follow his orders regardless of what I said. "Alvin has the perfect opportunity to attack, and he's not. Why?"

Sometimes I tussled with the twins, just to pass the time; they were gentle, and I snuck peeks of what happened outside when attempting to get past them. Their dragon reclined in the shade, both heads snapping at passing leaves, even setting some alight. A crowd gathered in the mead hall, and villagers marched between the huts with rigid regularity; children ran as messengers from the hall to the guards. Their shadows dragged with the dropping sun and gathering clouds; so did dried leaves and grass that gathered in strange piles.

Before I could think about the new vegetation, Ruffnut marked a spot on my forehead that she called "the Star Vantage point."

"You need to make sure that the knuckles go right here; then you see stars." She aimed. I flinched, but she pulled back at the last minute and chuckled. "It was worth it to see that look on your face."

I gave her a tight smile; Tuffnut then swung his fist. I used the glove, with the teeth retracted, to block the blow.

"Ow!" he rubbed his fist. "Metal must not like my skin."

"Who would? It smells like eel guts," Ruffnut replied. She then tested her fist against the glove, only to meet the same resistance. Tuffnut laughed at her pain.

"Will you knock it off?" Gobber pulled me away from the twins. "You're only giving him knowledge that can help him escape."

"You have nothing to worry about, Gobber." I kept my eyes peeled on the dried leaf piles. Something was not right. "If the twins ever got the bright idea to join forces, I would pity the man that would have to face them."

"Speaking of which, where are Astrid and the others?" Tuffnut shielded his eyes and looked out. He gave up trying to see what I saw. "If they were just going to LOOK at Mildew's hut, shouldn't they have been here by now? Astrid and Snotlout were supposed to take over from us ages ago."

That was it; no dragons flew in the air with riders. My breath tightened as the evening breeze grew stronger with a scent of sap.

"Probably they're waiting to tell your father," Gobber replied. "And they'll have to wait a long time."

"Gobber." My voice became sharp. "If Astrid, Snotlout and Fishlegs were waiting, at least one of them would be patrolling the island, and we would have seen them."

Oh gods. If anything had happened to them- I had ASKED Astrid to check on Mildew's hut- it would be my fault. With the hut on the far side of the island, only a loud, explosive struggle would alert the rest of the village. They were too focused on the trial.

"Hiccup. You're not leaving the hut. And neither are you two," Gobber told the twins. "Your chief gave you a job, and that means that you do it, no matter what."

That's when several of the guards abandoned their posts, gathering in the village center. The others shouted at them to keep their post, surrounding them. My breath tightened.

"Well, those guys aren't doing what the chief said!" Tuffnut burst out. "They're just setting the dead leaves on fire-"

Dead leaves on fire? I started as the flames streaked the ground. Gobber bore a shocked expression that reflected what I was thinking.

"Get back!" he shouted, rushing for the front door. It slammed with an ominous rattle. The back door's view offered chaos; smoke bloomed from the ground like exploding dandelion seeds with a familiar, saccharine smell . . .

"Dragon nip!" I screamed at the twins. "Get Belch and Barf away- it's an attack-" Identical thuds came from outside, as did protesting warbles. Gobber pulled in the twins as they reached for the dragon and slammed the back door.

"Hey! Let us out!" They charged against the wood, but Gobber's single hand held more strength than their reedy bodies.

"Getting killed won't save your dragon," he told them. "Hiccup, get upstairs!"

"What about the front door? Will it hold without you?"

"It's locked, and I built that door myself; it should hold against any battering ram. Now go!"

The stairs rattled with my metal leg's frantic steps; Gobber's tone more than actual terror compelled me to withdraw. Dad's decision had actually born merit; home was a durable fort in case of battle, and we could man each exit and entrance. I held my arms at the ready; the Nadder fangs rolled out. The twins gave up trying to get out and reached for the spare hammers that Gobber had brought; they helped attach one to his stump, took a stand beside him with the others, and grimaced.

"I've got this," he told them. "By now the ruckus should be reaching the mead hall, and we'll have back-up from Stoick and the others."

Keep an eye on the front door, just in case they get lucky."

"Gobber, I thought you said it would hold!" My expression tightened, and I got into a fighting stance position.

"I said it would; this is just a precaution!" He snarled as a heavy thud vibrated through the back door and through his body. "Got to boost up the morale here!"

Maybe he was right about the morale; I heard sickening, squishing sounds from outside. Swords thudding against breastplates, screams of men as they fell without limbs, death rattles. The smoke gave the Outcasts advantage; for they would strike those indecisive about leaving their posts.

We forgot that there were stupid Outcasts mixed in with the smart ones, like the ones who had tried to grab me that first night. Their object was to capture me alive, according to the wanted poster's requirements, if they wanted their thirty sheep and fish. We didn't think that one would dip a torch into a bucket of ale, take aim, and throw the bucket against the front door.

Flames licked the sturdy wood; as choking smoke and Outcasts stormed in, the twins jumped back and attempted to strike. They did their best, but grey smoke clouds poisoned their lungs and they got knocked away; I was coughing as well. Rough hands grabbed them.

"Is it the Dragon Conqueror?"

"No, he doesn't have blond hair."

Tuffnut was cast aside; Ruffnut reached out a hand towards him.

"Hiccup!" Gobber abandoned his post at the back door to fight the armored men, but a dozen had already stormed inside. He had to battle through them to get to the front.

Black had seeped into my lungs, but I struck at the first Outcast who climbed up the narrow stairs. A soaked bandanna covered half his face, giving him a bandit's appearance. He tried to grab my left hand, withdrew with a muffled yell and mangled fingers; I took the advantage to punch him in the nose so that he keeled backwards. The man below had to catch him, and I kicked with the metal leg. He only had black trousers and not a codpiece fortunately. They toppled backwards, crushing everyone below them.

At the top of the house, I had the high ground. As long as I stayed at the top of the stairs, they couldn't topple me. At least, that was the theory. Blazing rubble fell from the roof around me; I had to move to dodge them, and the Outcasts who had fallen were quick to get up. They were coughing but wore bandannas to protect their noses and mouths; they had PLANNED this stupid escapade, even if it got their Dragon Conqueror killed. The smoke grew thicker.

"Where . . . our . . . back-up?" I choked out, eyes watering, swinging blindly. The stairs had no railing, and the walls were hot to the touch. The only way was down, into the horde of blood-crazy Alvin recruits.

A rusty hammer connected with my forehead; I yelled and fell to the ground. Blood trickled, and I rolled to avoid another hammer swing. It crashed into a fallen shingle.

"Dad!" I gasped; smoke stifled my sound. "Gobber!"

"Hiccup! Hang on!" Clanging sounds came from Gobber. "Get away from them!"

I tried, but it was too late. Rough, unwashed hands clasped over my face, pinning me to the ground. One soon moved to my chest, wrapping snake-like muscles around it. He had figured out that I wore no armor there.

"Got him!" The masked Outcast leered at me. I couldn't breathe with the smothering, callused fingers over my mouth and nose.

"Knock him out; he's a tricky one."

"Fast or slowly?"

"Make it slow!" A harsh voice called. "He ruined my good fighting hand."

The arm around my middle tightened; I flailed and kicked as red and black darkened my vision. Whatever air remained got squeezed out, as if I were an accordion that a Gronkle had decided to jump on. Gobber's worried cries grew fainter, as did the Outcasts's skull-like grin.

21. Chapter Twenty-Two

So the Outcasts have Hiccup now, after slowly knocking him out. To put it mildly, he's in a bad situation.

johnnylee619- Oh yes.

Stratoc- Stupidity breeds desperation of the worst kind. And you'll see what happened to the Berk gang.

Consciousness returned in slow, painful bursts, with waves of numbness shooting through bound arms. A sharp sea breeze cut through the throbbing lump on my forehead; so did deep grunts and hissing.

I kept my eyes shut against the breeze; this was not happening, my father's security measures had not failed. A metal cup pressed against my dry lips, spilling sickly-sweet mead. When I tried to turn away, another hand grasped my hair, forced me to swallow. My lungs burned, and for a terrible moment it felt like I was coughing fire. The same bristly hand whacked my back.

The night scene and skull-like grins came into focus. Outcasts stood with large swords and metal nets; those who didn't watch me watched the cloudy horizon. I saw a black mass encased in barbed metal, drowsy green eyes dilated as they took in my condition.

"Toothless!" I mouthed with dizzy relief. He was all right, even if bound and muzzled with skull-adorned leather. As if he could view my

thoughts, Toothless's expression became harsh as a familiar, bulky Outcast approached.

"Nice to have you join us," Alvin said conversationally. "Was worried that we may have knocked you into Valhalla. That's enough, Savage."

The Outcast with the cup let me go; I swayed. Every Viking ship had a wooden beam at the stern and keel; it seems that to avoid getting slashed by the Nadder fangs, the Outcasts had wrapped my arms in metal chains and then tied the chains to the beam. Dragon teeth couldn't go through metal, after all. Thick ropes tied the keel in place so that it didn't jostle.

"I bet you're wondering how we outsmarted your father's guards and kept him away from the home invasion," Alvin said. The mast cast rectangular shadows on his spiked armor. "It's quite a tale."

"Actually no," I said, throat parched-dry even with the mead. "I'm wondering how you're going to split thirty sheep among twenty men."

He stopped smiling. I adjusted my footing and found my legs tightly bound at the knees; Alvin must have not been able to remove the metal prosthetic. He wanted to make sure that on the off-chance I was able to remove the chains and free Toothless that we wouldn't escape.

"Why don't I demonstrate. Slaughter, you say you lost three fingers in the raid?"

"You bet!" The man waved a bandaged hand.

"Why don't we settle your share here? A limb for a limb." Alvin bent onto Toothless's limp form and yanked a blue ear out of the netting. With the other hand he pulled out his large sword. Toothless closed his eyes.

"No!" The shout escaped my lips, and I strained forward. The chains rattled.

Alvin chuckled. Toothless gave me a reproachful glance as the Outcast released him.

"Battle humor, son; Slaughter will get his fair share of sheep, more than enough to feed his family. Of course," he shot a glance at his men, "you'd get more if you had been more careful with our Dragon Conqueror. Could have killed him."

"That's not our fault!" One of them called. "You try burning down a mead hall in broad daylight."

Burning down a mead hall? Alvin saw the shock on my face.

"Oh, we didn't mention that Berk has been reduced to cinders?" he asked. "Your father's a tough Viking, but he didn't make it out of the blaze. What a shame." He shook his head and tsked.

No. I met his eyes, disbelieving. The ship sailed at a steady clip,

but no one lit a torch in the growing darkness.

"Oh, don't worry, not everyone died. Your girlfriend's on the other boat with HER Nadder, as are the other riders." He pointed. "That's why it's a bigger ship, what with all the Berk dragons on board. She'll live, as long as we come to an understanding."

Salt dried on my ragged lips. I took slow deep breaths as the waves cradled the other boat.

"It's all right to cry son; you've had a rough day. I won't think less of you." His black eyes glittered.

By all means, he wasn't far off; Astrid's training hadn't prepared me for facing an army, my friends wouldn't be able to ride to the rescue with their dragons trussed up on an Outcast ship, and Berk had burned down while prosecuting Mildew. I had almost every reason to burst into angry tears.

Almost.

Vikings couldn't cry, and pride wouldn't have let me anyway; thoughts clacked against my throbbing head. I shifted weight onto my right foot and ignored the chains cutting into my elbows.

"What sort of understanding, Alvin?"

"Oh, we have a dragon problem on Outcast Island," he said. "We were hoping you could help us fix it and then some." He shot a glance at Toothless.

"You want me to teach you to ride dragons." My voice came out flat. "I don't believe this."

"And why not, boy? Think we can't handle it?"

I bit down on the anger so that it hardened into crisp words. "Berk has a Dragon Academy. You didn't have to shoot down my dragon, starve out children to recruit them, humiliate my father's guards, or burn down the village to learn dragon riding. We have something called rolling admissions. You could have APPLIED."

His expression darkened. "Not with your father hanging around the place."

That's when I knew: my father was still alive. That's why we were sailing without torchlight, why Alvin had only revived me on the open sea, and why I was tied to the boat. Dad would come, and Thornado wouldn't be able to sink the ship while I was chained to the stern like a pirate's hostage. They needed an opening.

"I understand my father's perspective," I said, "considering you killed my mother."

"What?"

"That's why Dad had you banished," I continued in an offhand tone. "She was too smart for your political schemes, so you killed her the way you killed Humongous the Hotshot."

A terrible moment brewed like a maelstrom; the sea air churned and a large wave sprayed freezing foam. Outcast exclamations peppered the air. Alvin made a motion, as if wanting to grab my throat. Then he restrained himself.

"Is that what your father told you?" he asked, anger seething between his bushy eyebrows.

"He doesn't tell me anything." I kept my words careless. "And it's not like I'm going anywhere. Who taught you to wrap people in chains?"

"Berserks," he said simply, coming closer. "Quite nice people when they're trying not to kill you, and they look like shiny fish when wrapped up."

I kept my eyes level with his. "What did you do to my mother? Why did my father have you banished?"

Alvin's eyes gained a dangerous, amused, twinkle. He let sultry words slink with the sea breeze. Apparently murderous barbarians could tell campfire stories, and his tone become affable, almost friendly. Despite Toothless's warning glance, the sharp sea breeze, and the Outcasts' gleaming weapons, Alvin's tale pulled me in. His gifted tongue went to work.

22. Chapter Twenty-Three

****Alvin finally tells Hiccup how his mother died, after Hiccup has wondered for about ten chapters. Shame that Alvin has a gifted tongue and is using it on the boy.****

****Stratoc- Thanks! I was in the Riders of Berk zone when writing Dragon Conqueror, so had to think about the consistencies and inconsistencies. And I don't know, the way they trussed Toothless up in the season finale looked fairly menacing, like something out of a shibari guidebook. ****

****johnnylee619- Listen to that instinct, although Alvin has a stronger ulterior motive.****

****MEC- You will see. As for the twins, they were the only dragon riders to evade capture on Berk. Meaning they'll be part of the rescue party.****

****ElmoDaHorse- Updating now, :D****

"Humongous the Hotshot was an idiot," Alvin began; his black eyes widened like round shadows. "Even worse, he was a Hero. One of those blond do-gooders who rush into a calamity like they're tidal waves ripe for surfing. He had his strong qualities, but he was not a Berk Viking; for starters, he lacked the proper hair type. All smooth and gelled down, instead of rough and bristly. No man could fear him, and thus they always underestimated him."

Despite myself, I saw Humongous as Alvin described him: a brash, bearded youth, setting his shining axe on the Berk soil, opening his arms to the Vikings running towards him with threatening hammers.

"The day he landed was a Thor's day where Thor decided to muddy the fine Berk grasses. Everyone else got sopping wet, trying to get the animals and sheep inside, but Humongous looked pristine in soaked armor and wet hair. Stoick had been wrestling the yaks into the barns, and he was splattered with mud when greeting the blond hero. Not a good first impression." Alvin chuckled. "Valhallarama was also there, and she took in the hero with admiring eyes. Your father noticed, but he said nothing. Humongous bore numerous dragon claws, after all, looped around his middle like belt clips; you don't ignore trophies like that.

"It only got worse when the weather got better; Humongous saw what your mother could do with an axe, and he was smitten. They'd spend their days roving the islands, seeking out dragons to slay and trolls to slaughter. She took to wearing his favorite claw, one that belonged to a Monstrous Nightmare. Stoick's temper boiled with the rising sun."

Toothless's hissing interrupted Alvin. The Outcast put down his spiked arms.

"Would someone shut that beast up? He's not being a good audience."

Savage marched forward with his sword.

"It's all right, bud!" I exclaimed, fingers fumbling frantically. "He's just talking. Don't get your ears lopped off."

Toothless gave a sarcastic hiss and quieted. He kept his glaring green eyes on me. Alvin resumed.

"The only bad thing about Humongous was that he couldn't sing. You might call it a good thing, though, for if he were perfect, your father might have accused him of demon heritage and cut him down. But being tone-deaf didn't turn off Valhallarama; she was too fascinated with his muscles and accurate aim.

"Stoick confided in me; he couldn't appear jealous to his fellow Vikings, and I was good at keeping secrets. We'd spend our afternoons in the mead hall, chatting under the large paintings. Something had to be done before he killed Humongous or challenged him to an honor duel, for he couldn't ask such a competent Viking to leave Berk. Nor would he accuse Humongous of treason; he had too much honor for that.

"The next day, after one vicious dragon raid, I sought Humongous out. He was in the woods, counting the dragon claws he had amassed, and was picking the finest to bestow upon Valhallarama. And like the idiot he was, he asked which one looked the best." Alvin leaned in closer. "And what do you think I said?"

"You told him he had bigger problems than courting my mother." I couldn't keep the disgust out of my voice. "No wonder they call you Treacherous; you betrayed my father's trust."

"I did it for Stoick's own good; he was never good at talking calmly to people he disliked. Humongous either needed to do an Impossible Task to win him over or leave while the going was good. Humongous

wouldn't leave of course, so I set him an Impossible Task. He could get back into the chief's good graces if he got rid of the dragons once and for all. The idiot believed me, not realizing that his stellar Dragon Slaying was causing the whole mess."

"What was the Impossible Task?"

"Finding and stealing a Fire Stone." Alvin held up his arms to demonstrate. "Some believed that a rock pilfered from a volcano's heart allowed one to control dragons, to repel them from our sheep and fish. I suggested to Humongous that if he found THE rock- a large, glittering lava-baked ruby that reflected eons of power- and presented it to Stoick, then all would be forgiven. For Stoick would sacrifice his love for Valhallarama if he could save his tribes from dragon raids, control the mighty beasts."

Toothless could not resist another sarcastic grunt. Savage unsheathed his sword.

"No, the dragon's right." Alvin waved his hand. "No such stone exists, and if it did, the man who owned it would be unstoppable."

I would have shaken from the anger if my chained arms weren't going numb. Alvin smiled grimly.

"It was Humongous's fault for not knowing better; a traveling hero should have been up to date on the latest facts, and he couldn't resist collecting things. The task also had to be Impossible. Of course," his face darkened, "the idiot had to say goodbye to Valhallarama. He didn't tell her where he was going or what he was seeking, because he was doing the Impossible Task to win her properly and having her accompany would ruin the point, but they had their goodbye kisses. Then he jumped in his boat and sailed toward the Lava Lout islands, where the deadliest volcanoes and Vikings lay.

"The years passed. Valhallarama grieved, but she knew that no one came back from Lava Lout islands except in pieces; she burned her collection of dragon claws and buried herself in slaying."

"I thought my mother didn't know where Humongous had sailed to." I cut through. "How did she find out?"

The rhythm broke. Alvin scowled at me and cracked a hairy knuckle.

"Very few boats sail to the dead sea, where the Lava Lout Islands lie. News of Humongous's venture came to our ears, in time. They thought he was committing suicide."

"Stoick surprisingly grieved with his wife, thinking that his jealousy drove a good man away from Berk. Perhaps he suspected what I had done but wouldn't confront me, for after that he chose a newly arrived blacksmith as his confidante." Alvin's voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. "I kept to the shadows, bidding my time, gathering men. And then you came along, a sickly runt."

I bit my lip against the insult. Alvin drew back and spoke loudly, embarrassing me.

"Valhallarama didn't take care of her health; she never knew how to

lie down and let a baby grow. We weren't surprised when you were born with limp limbs and hairy ears; neither was Stoick, to an extent. Hiccups had been born when a mother didn't rest. But when he held you in his arms, oh," Alvin made a disgusted face, "it was like a Nadder had sliced the violence out of him. He wouldn't stop cradling you or singing to you, and oh, it was disgraceful. Small wonder that some men spoke against him, accused him of having gone soft."

"And I'm guessing you were one of those men," I said as my face burned.

"Oh, I didn't do anything but listen," he said casually. "Would I lie about your father's immense love, or your mother's determine to quest her life away? It made you valuable, more valuable than any other chief's son; if anything happened to you, Stoick would be broken. If only your mother didn't sleep with an axe on her side of the bed, where she kept you."

Harsh, bawdy laughter from the Outcasts; I squinted to maintain eye contact.

"That's when I passed along a rumor from Trader Johann's father, Trader Selvig. Selvig had heard of a tone-deaf slave in the Lava Lout Mines, digging year after year for a precious ruby. He had found many in the volcano's thick walls, but not the one he sought after the most." Alvin's smile became delighted as he saw my realizing expression. "Of course Valhallarama packed her ax, entrusted you to Stoick and sailed off. If there was but the faintest hope--"

"You lied to her," I said. "If no one came back from Lava Lout Island--"

"Oh if only I had lied. It would have made things easier." Alvin turned away, fingering his sword. "Valhallarama was a chief's wife, so she had more privilege than most Vikings sailing to the Lava Louts. She showed her Berk crest, demanded to see their chief, and asked for the tone-deaf slave. They said she'd have to drag him from the caves, for he never stopped digging.

"I don't know what she found down there; maybe she saw a wizened ex-Hero, hair scorched by the boiling temperatures, skin branded with the Slavemark, and hands scarred from digging through hot rock, but he could still TALK, may the gods curse him for eternity. He broke down and told her everything, seeing as she bore the chief's crest and the mother-woman's hips, and he begged her to kill him and end his pointless existence. He had done the Impossible Task for nothing, at the suggestion of a man named Alvin." He shuddered with anger. "She returned to the surface with his bloodied body, a dreadful cough, and payment for the Lava Lout chief. He was buried on the beach where the moon hit the sand.

"Things only got worse from there." Alvin scowled. "A good chief would have waited for his wife to return, or send an expendable envoy, but Stoick had heard the same rumor from Selvig. You were four at the time, trying to pick up your mother's ax and imitating his swagger. He entrusted you to Gobber- NOT to me- and took ten men to Lava Lout island, including me. I went along and volunteered some of the more rebellious Berk residents for the job. If they died with the chief, their loyalty would be assuaged."

"You were planning a coup," I said. "When Dad hit Lava Lout Island, you'd be found out. Mom had been there for a few weeks, and she had realized who had betrayed Humongous. She maybe even sent a message that you couldn't intercept, so Dad knew. It's only a question of why she didn't sail back herself and cut out your heart, or why you failed."

The sword slid out of its sheath. Alvin held it at my throat.

"Interrupt me again, and I'll make sure your lips are sewn with sheep sinew."

The tip felt like the end of a polished Thunderdrum fang. I kept the defiant look.

"She didn't sail back because she had gone into the mines. No slave escapes from Lava Lout Island with the volcanic vapors poisoning their lungs; a mere visit had infected your mother. Sailing back immediately would have killed her over a matter of days. Oh, the Lout chief's medicine woman tried her best, but your mother didn't know how to sit still and take medicine. She paced by the day until your father's boat landed on the red shores. Then she caught glimpse of who was on board and ran onto the beach." Alvin looked grim. "If she had been in top shape, I wouldn't have survived, but as it were, I was able to block the ax blow. We parried for horrible minutes." Alvin edged the sword under my chin, pricking the Adam's apple. "Stoick tried to break us up, but the rebellious men kept him away, starting their coup at the precise wrong minute. I managed to stab in self-defense, and she fell to the sand."

He feinted with such a jab; I started. The scene came alive in my mind, with the clanging of ax against sharp steel. My mother would have gone down with a violent war cry, clutching at the wound in her chest.

"That was when the Lava Louts chose to be do-gooders, despite enslaving Vikings and killing them with the volcano. Valhallarama had won their hearts, even if she had murdered their best slave, and they knew that helping a coup went against the Viking code. Then they had the gall to betray me to Stoick, to tell them of the Impossible Task. You'd think I had murdered Humongous myself!

"We were rounded up, set on a small dinghy, and banished to Outcast Isle. Your mother was given a Lava Lout funeral with high acclaim, and your father took her armor for safekeeping. After all I had done for Stoick!" He tsked. "If it weren't for me, you wouldn't have been born, and he wouldn't have gotten the best woman on Berk! Why did he repay me so cruelly for such kindness?"

It was hard to speak with the sharp tip, but Gobber's words wafted as if from a dream. "Because there are some depths that Vikings don't stoop to, no matter the cost."

"And you think your father would wish the years different?" He whispered, pressing the sword harder, though not so hard as to nick the skin. "You think he'd wish away the years he spent watching you grow, spending time with Valhallarama? If it came to doing the right thing and keeping you, he would pick you and let Humongous rot in the mines."

This actually explained why Dad had been ashamed of me, why he had locked me in the smithy with Gobber from danger, why those awkward moments had existed. It also explained why he had never mentioned Alvin.

"I was not born because of you." My voice came out raspy. "I was a happy accident, a hiccup."

Alvin grimaced and withdrew the sword. The grey hilt made a hard thunk when it connected. Toothless roared, my forehead ignited with pain, and I could not hide the involuntary yell.

"First thing we need to get straight is that you were born because of me," he said as I pressed my back against the beam. "So you owe me the dragon riding lessons."

More blood blinked into my eyes, but I lifted my head and kept my hands steady. Alvin shook his head.

"So we have to do this the hard way. Who's got a bone needle and sinew?" he called. Several men volunteered. "We'll sew his mouth shut for a couple of hours!"

23. Chapter Twenty-Four

****Only two more chapters to go! Then I'll take a break before uploading the sequel, "How to Court a Dragon Prince," because the sequel is still in progress on Deviantart.****

****ElmoDaHorse- :) I always update early in the morning (8 or 9 AM), and happened to see your review.****

****johnnylee619- Stoick needs to, but Hiccup also has a trick up his sleeve.****

****live laugh play music- Yes, ouch. A camera at a soccer game hit me in the same spot that Alvin hit Hiccup, so it was surprisingly simple to recreate the scenario.****

****Stratoc- I wish this backstory were canon, too, not because it would stroke my ego but because the book's statement (that book Hiccup was born because of book Alvin's actions and now he's Alvin's archnemesis) has a more horrific implication in the Riders of Berk universe. I hope they explain the canon backstory in full next season, to show us why Alvin got banished. ****

**** Hiccup has figured out how to buy more time, rest assured. ****

The wind died. Many Outcasts yelled excitedly at the prospect of tailored mutilation. Toothless strained as Alvin called for bone needles; two Outcasts had to hold him down.

"Make sure the Night Fury can't get away!" Alvin called. "We don't want any last-minute rescues!"

"Toothless, don't panic," I managed, even though panic pounded through my spinning head. Time had been sliced in half like stale bread.

Alvin held the gleaming thread and needle in one hand and a thick green cloth in the other. He gained a malevolent smile.

"This won't hurt. At first. When the stitches settle in, then they will sting, and every time you try to scream the stinging will get worse."

I glared and yanked my left arm out of the chains. Freckled skin scraped against metal, leaving red marks. Nadder fangs rolled met coarse twine, the rope holding the keel in place. The snaps echoed in Alvin's disbelieving face.

"Hey, what are you-"

The keel sagged to one side; the ship turned lazily. I grabbed the wooden beam and pushed. Outcasts yelled as the turn became sharper. The bone needles clattered to the deck and rolled into small crannies.

"Tie up the hostage with dragon teeth to your steering device," I muttered, making the ship rock back and forth. "Really smart move." The remaining chains acted like a seat belt, holding my right arm in place.

While Alvin had been monologuing about my mother, I had fiddled with the glove's gears so that Nadder fangs retracted. Since my arms were chained together, each glove cocooned in steel, the teeth's space left numb slack. My fingers had cramped but kept fiddling.

Faint, cutting ripples and Thunderdrum screeches had carried over the water. Anger at the past had distracted Alvin from the present; the men had also lost their navigational skills when listening, allowing us to drift. When he had loudly boasted about my sickly infancy, the Outcasts' laughter had drowned out the muted rattling. In addition, the loud narration had probably alerted the rescue party from Berk, if they were on the water.

Things would have worked better if I had kept my mouth shut, allowed Alvin to monologue without interruption, but his words had stung like fresh nettles. I couldn't NOT react, even when the blow to the head had almost caused me to slip and expose the slack.

Lesson learned: next time I'm distracting a smooth-talking barbarian, ask him about trolls. Trolls have nothing to do with my parents.

Alvin regained his footing and satisfied smile. "You think that's enough to stop us, boy?" He marched forward, cloth and sword gripped in his hands. "We still have your dragon, and I'm sure you don't want him killed."

"I wasn't trying to stop you," I said. "I was stalling." Thornado's scream cut from behind me into the keel, shattering the chains and teeth on my right arm. I broke free as the keel went lopsided, now a useless triangle of wood.

With a final thrust, the smaller boat crashed into the larger one trailing along, the pointed skull masthead cutting a hole into the side. Dragon and people screamed alike from the other boat; two

sounded like Fishlegs and Snotlout.

Alvin swayed, still gripping his sword. I let go of the keel and slashed through the ropes binding my legs together. The fangs snagged on my trousers and some skin, but the rope snapped. I used the metal leg to kick Alvin in the groin. He grunted and doubled over.

"Hiccup, go for the throat!" Astrid's shout came from the larger boat. "Two slashes, like we practiced!"

"I hear you!" I shouted back. The teeth made diagonal rivers across the thick neck before Alvin pushed me back and lifted me. My head spun with pain as he pressed me against the wooden beam.

He gripped my left shoulder the way Dad had, only Dad had made an effort to trim and clean his fingernails, and laughed. Gushing, amused gurgles sprayed blood down his front like streams of wine. Even the other Outcasts looked shocked.

"Takes more than that to kill Alvin the Treacherous, boy," he said. "Do you want to know why? Look closely."

His eyes held terrible, frozen images: a coiled serpent spraying grass with venom, a fanged wolf that gnawed on an eagle's eye, a hell-goddess dragging a bloodied youth through an ocean of skulls. I tried to look away, but the wolf's chill reeled me towards the images.

"The trickster god keeps an eye out for me," Alvin whispered. "Why do you think Stoick never killed me himself?"

He could have been lying, using his words to instill terror the way he had persuaded children to attack Berk. Either way, I couldn't move my left arm towards him, and my right arm banged against his face uselessly.

Two large bulking figures dropped onto the deck. One looked like Gobber, if Gobber had ever added iron scissors to his stump. The other ran towards Alvin and me.

"Not a step closer, Stoick, or I slit your son's windpipe!" Alvin shouted, pushing me forward. The sword came up beside my throat, threatening to do what my teeth hadn't done to Alvin's neck.

Dad stopped and swung his hammer, knocking out the Outcast that came from behind him.

"You lousy Outcasts owe me a blond mustache!" Gobber shouted, slicing through Toothless's barbed net with the scissors. My dragon's wings, scratched but solid, opened into the sky. "Have at them, Toothless!"

24. Chapter Twenty-Five

****Penultimate chapter, and Toothless is now free! ****

****johnnylee619- I couldn't agree more. :)****

****MEC-** Believe me, Toothless isn't the only one to kick Alvin's butt. The twins have their moment of awesome in this chapter. And glad that you liked Gobber's line.**

****ElmoDaHorse-** Randomness is accepted. And it is Gobber's time for payback.**

A blazing moon cast a spiked shadow as Toothless crawled out of the net, bent his head so Gobber could remove the leather muzzle, and let out an ear-piercing roar. The wind carried the shriek, swirled it around both boats as if encasing them in a blanket of white banshees. Alvin tried to give orders, but Toothless's roar and panicked cries drowned his yelling. I wish it could have weakened his arm grip.

The Outcasts had seen a Night Fury fly, but they had never seen him attack. More importantly, they had never seen his protective instinct kick in on a cramped, drifting boat, or two Vikings fighting alongside him. Toothless leaped on their heads like a nimble dancer, spraying fire when they got too close. Gobber's scissors shot out and severed men's trousers from their bottoms while his right fist punched them in the gut. Thornado's shadow receded, only to return with more dropping figures. Bards wouldn't have to exaggerate about the thudding boots on the deck or the frantic retreat from the Outcasts' side as two smaller Vikings bowled them out of the way. The ocean echoed with ugly, angry splashes.

Alvin shouted black and blue threats. He held me as a shield, sword level to the neck, and still no one was paying attention. Dad kept his distance, but he cleared a path for Toothless.

My left arm felt like rotten mutton, and seeing Alvin shrug off throat-slitting had done wonders to my confidence. Still I raised my free arm, waved it to get Toothless's attention, and gestured at him to fire. He widened his dilated eyes, asking the obvious question.

"No, I don't want to die," I said as Alvin's eyes glared with suspicion. "Trust me, bud; take the shot."

Toothless flattened his ears and blasted. Alvin yanked me away from the magenta fireball. It glanced off the broken keel, left it in burnt tatters.

"Nice try," he said, "whatever you were planning. You're too valuable to die."

A smirk crossed my face. I brought the right-hand glove to Alvin's scruffy cheek. It glowed white-hot and sizzled.

Alvin's yell cut through the deck's clamor as I felt myself dropping. My metal leg slid, but I regained balance and sprinted. Before Alvin could make a desperate yank, I had already slipped to my dragon's side.

"Don't let them get away!" He screamed at his men. "You want those thirty sheep or your heads mounted on pikes?"

The words sunk into their bleeding skulls; eerie light returned to their eyes. Their fighting efforts doubled.

I quickly swung my right leg over the crushed saddle. They hadn't removed it, thank Thor, or Toothless's tailfin; the gods must have addled their brains when it came to restraining Night Furies. Toothless growled with approval as I clicked into place.

Nets flung through the air like silver jellyfish; Dad and Gobber caught most of them. A large one, however, sailed over us; Toothless and I saw it at the same time, and I gave the stirrup a fierce kick.

Toothless had his wings open like a blue-black umbrella; we shot up into the air as the net crashed downward. I grabbed the barbs with both hands and flung it off. Alvin's yell spun away as we soared higher. Swirling winds froze my cheeks, shot life into Toothless's eyes. The waves frothed.

"Hiccup! Get to the other boat! You'll be safe!" Dad called.

"No can do, Dad!" I screamed at him; Toothless roared in agreement. Clouds covered the moon, immersing the waves below in darkness. We switched directions and dove for the bigger boat. Our Vikings had already climbed to it from Alvin's broken lot and grappled.

Three Outcasts had held Astrid, Fishlegs and Snotlout as their respective shields; their dragons, as well as the twins' Zippleback, were chained on deck with heavy weights. Dad's Vikings hesitated to attack with so many young hostages. The Outcasts not holding knives to sooty throats already ran to mount a defense.

"Hiccup, look out!" Fishlegs shouted as four catapults fired. "Smaller rocks, aimed for the wings!"

Alvin had prepared for every possible plan, even his Dragon Conqueror getting into the air. Adrenaline shot through Toothless's body and he spun to dodge them with a lightning bolt's finesse. I bent my head lower and let Toothless ram into an unsuspecting Outcast.

"Good!" I told my dragon. "Think we can draw their fire?"

He responded by opening his mouth. Four fireballs, custom-made for four catapults in a neat row. The Outcasts could not dodge the glowing rubble, and Astrid took the opportunity to break her captor's grip and run to Stormfly. So did Snotlout with Hookfang, head-butting his Outcast. Fishlegs whimpered, closed his eyes, and backhanded the bearded brute holding him. He looked surprised when the Outcast fell.

"Even better," I said. "I forgot that you used to destroy Viking weapons on a regular basis."

Toothless slapped me with his ear. I patted him and recoiled as the twins shot onto the deck. Their hammers swung with perfect synchronization, knocking Outcasts out of the way.

"You shouldn't have touched our dragon!" Tuffnut shouted, beating down upon one unconscious man. Ruffnut covered his back, knocking out a brute with a boar-branded ax.

"Or taken our Dragon Trainer!" Ruffnut responded. Her hammer pounded on her opponent's helmet with echoing clangs.

"You-can't-call-him-the-wrong-name!"

I gave them a few minutes to earn a heroic reputation. If the bards ever found time to compose a ballad, he could mention how the moon emerged to gleam on their helmets, which they used to swing each other around. Thor, I had only been joking when I had said I would pity the man having to face them.

"Guys, your dragon's free now." I called. "Fishlegs got the nets off him."

They paused.

"Does this mean we can't hit people anymore?" Ruffnut asked.

I opened my mouth to answer, but a larger figure had emerged behind the twins. He grabbed their heads and clunked them together. They slumped to the deck.

"You ought to choose your friends better." Alvin stepped over them. "You're not getting off this ship if you want them to live."

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Says who?"

Wings rustled in harsh pairs. I looked behind to see my friends on their dragons. Belch and Barf swooped forward and scooped up the twins in their claws, away from Alvin's sword.

"It's over," I said. "Your men didn't deserve the thirty sheep anyway."

Alvin raised his sword and moved to throw it. Toothless opened his mouth and let out a large fireball. It knocked the Outcast off the deck; he made an ice-shattering splash in the water. Most men would be screaming in shock or surprise, but Alvin uttered a more terrifying sound, one that I still hear in my nightmares .

He went down laughing.

25. Chapter Twenty-Six

****Last chapter! Thank you to all who have read thus far and enjoyed the ride. In a week I'll start updating the sequel, How to Court a Dragon Prince, which crosses over with Pixar's Brave.****

**** ElmoDaHorse- The keel can be repaired, lol. Though it has suffered plenty of abuse.****

****MEC- It's over for the moment, rest assured. Things get worse in the sequel, but for now Hiccup has won. And yes, the twins are awesome when they combine forces.****

****Stratoc- Thanks! Hiccup narrowly escaped this time, and Fishlegs can punch if he feels up to it. ****

The moon returned like a wandering actress to her forlorn curtain call. Each dragon's large, billowing wings made soothing, swooping sounds over the water. We didn't burn the ships; there was no need with most of Alvin's men overboard, desperately paddling for the

nearby island, and I had to retrieve the papers that Alvin had stolen.

"Can we torch them?" Tuffnut asked, rubbing his helmet. He and Ruffnut had mounted their Zippleback and scoured the Outcast ship with green flame.

"Let them go," I said, arms filled with parchment. The past hour's glory had evaporated with Alvin's fall. "It's like kicking a worm when it's down."

"You don't KICK worms, they're too soft for that," Tuffnut explained. "You try to wrap them around your fingers and see how long it takes for them to find their way back--"

"I think he means it'd be like kicking a barnacle." Ruffnut grabbed her twin's horn to explain. "The barnacle can't get away, so you're causing it pain for no reason."

"Oh. That makes more sense."

I sighed. Twins would be twins. "Let's go home."

One ship lay unscathed, one that lacked a red skull. Bandaged warriors waved axes at us; Toothless and I landed on the clean deck. The twins crash-landed, and Fishlegs toppled Meatlug on top of them. Snotlout and Hookfang settled gently onto a bare corner, only to roll into Buckey and Mulch.

Dad joined us, letting go of Thornado's thick claws. He ran over and scooped me off Toothless in his scratched arms. Papers flew. Toothless reared. The air seemed warmer as I spun.

"If Alvin hadn't set the mead hall ablaze, we could have come sooner," Dad said furiously. "So many people hurt, and so many buildings destroyed. Berk has to practically be rebuilt."

I hugged him back. He smelled of sweat, ale, and . . . comfort. It didn't matter if once he had thought me an embarrassment or an accident or a sickly runt; he was my dad, and he had come.

Astrid and Stormfly landed. I staggered forward to hug her as well. And would have, if Gobber's hook hadn't snagged me mid-stride.

"You can reconcile like proper lovers later." He gestured for a lamp. "Got a lot of blood to mop up."

I protested, but Gobber sat me down on a hard bench, said that the blows might induce a fit, and wiped my face with a damp cloth. Stinging yarrow, cold and freshly pulled from the Berk soil; I yelped. So much for Viking bravery.

Toothless paced restlessly as large blood smears appeared on the cloth. Gobber grinned.

"Three days of dragon nip and you're flying again. Isn't it good to be a Night Fury?"

Toothless gave a sharp-toothed snarl.

"True, we could have done without the Outcast invasion and Mildew's cellar." Gobber peered at my face.

"So I was right then," I said, watching the amounts of dried blood gather on the white cloth. "Mildew was helping the Outcasts, and he had Toothless in his root cellar."

"That we already knew and what your father was trying to prove," Gobber got a larger wad of white cloth and pressed it against my stinging forehead. "Hold it there while I roll up your sleeves; you look like an undead warrior with that face of yours."

"We were just going to skim the area to see if there were Outcasts, but they were ready for us," Astrid cut through grimly. "There were clouds of smoke that knocked all our dragons out as we flew over; it gave away our presence. The three of us were outnumbered trying to defend our dragons. Don't look like that, Hiccup, it wasn't your fault."

Gobber stripped off the dragon-teeth gloves (teeth retracted) and began wrapping my right arm in steaming strips. The heavy chains had left red, skin-scraping marks above each elbow. No wonder people never commented on Berserk's immaculate complexions.

"It WAS my fault, though; if you had stayed in the village, you would have been safe."

"Sure. Just like you were safe," she began, only to stop when Dad glowered. "They were planning to take all of us probably with the amounts of dragon nip they had, maybe to get tamer dragons for riding. Alvin was gloating about that."

"No kidding." I rolled up my left sleeve so that Gobber could examine the scrapes mirroring those on the right arm.

"These marks aren't going to go away in one day," he said. "Maybe the one on your forehead will with proper stitching, but I don't know if you want to see a bone needle now."

I smiled weakly; he must have heard Alvin's threats carried over the water. Toothless looked concerned on seeing the red scrapes.

Snotlout pushed his way through and peered at my forehead. His face fell.

"It's only a tetchy scar," he said. "I was hoping Alvin had left a big slash or his initial."

Astrid elbowed him in the gut.

"Hey, that was a compliment!"

To most Vikings, it would be. Astrid had once mentioned that battle was only fun if you got a scar. But you couldn't make a glorious ballad out of back-talking an Outcast and getting hilt-whipped for stupid sass.

Wait, maybe you could. It depended on the narrator's dry humor.

"It could be worse," Dad said. He grimaced as I peeled away the forehead cloth and examined the red blots. "We had a lot of burn victims, though Gothi's been attending to them. A few didn't make it."

"What?"

"Every war has its price," Gobber told me in an undertone. I looked closely. Wrinkles had hidden the scorch marks around his eyebrows. "The Outcasts made us pay with interest. You'll see when we get back."

The news dampened the ship's triumphant mood. The Outcast ships diminished into ship-wrecks. Snotlout didn't bother showing off a bruise on his elbow.

Midnight waves came with gusto; Thor sent steady winds now that the battle had ended. The dragons scuttled back and forth as we bobbed up and down, and Snotlout tumbled into Meatlug with a grunt. Stormfly almost released her blue spines when a stray ax swung her way.

"We'll get home the dragon way," I told Dad. "There's not enough room on the ship for all of us."

The others happily took to the suggestion; Snotlout swung onto Hookfang and took off. The ship rocked, and Astrid held Stormfly to comfort her. Meatlug's departure left a smaller impact, and the twins somehow managed a vertical lift. That left Astrid, Dad and me.

"It's late, and you're injured," he said. "Will you find your way back?"

"Dad." I put down the cloth. "Toothless and I may have not been flying for days, we still know how to. Besides, won't you and Thornado join us? Won't every dragon on Berk be escorting us home?"

He looked to his men. "There's so much work to be done when we get back. Being on the ship gives me time and reason to make a sensible plan."

I knew what he meant. Having an immortal Outcast as a sworn nemesis limited hopes for peaceful existence on Berk, even if the Outcast were recovering from a fireball and shattering splash into the ocean. But acknowledging Alvin's eventual return felt wrong, as if the last week had happened for nothing. It hadn't.

"We can focus on the repairs, the medical assistance and dissuading would-be bounty hunters," I said. "With no Outcast to offer the thirty sheep, the incentive will be gone. Still, there are idiots with hammers."

"Too many of them."

To myself I added another task on the to-do-list: negotiate with a trickster god so that Alvin lost Loki's favor. If I could trick an intelligent Outcast with a gifted tongue, maybe Loki wouldn't be more difficult. Gothi the Village Elder could help, and maybe a Viking at the next Thing would know how to communicate with gods.

Gobber stopped wrapping bandages; I lifted up my arms, adjusting to the weight. The dragon gloves lay beside me on the bench, Alvin's dried, mud-brown blood on the curved fangs.

"Be sure to keep your sleeves nice and long," he advised. "Don't want people thinking you tried juggling knives after two rounds of ale."

I faked a smile and retrieved the gloves. They had protected my upper arms from the chain marks, but the right one needed repairs with the teeth shattered and the gears shot. Just a little welding, some leather-poking-

Toothless gave me a look. He hissed at the gloves like they were smoked eel piled by the dozen.

I handed the gloves to Gobber. "We'll repair them at the smithy, later. Keep them safe."

He raised an eyebrow.

"It's about a ten-minute ride to Berk. If anything happens, I have Toothless."

Gobber took the gloves and examined them.

Astrid came over. She pulled me into a hug- not a kiss, because Dad was watching, but a warm, one-shouldered embrace. I closed my eyes until she broke away.

"We better get back. Going to be a sleepless night," she said, hopping onto Stormfly. They took off the way a dove leaps from a pillow.

"That leaves just us," I said. Toothless came over.

"Hiccup-"

"Dad, I've survived Alvin, lightning bolts, and the Green Death," I said. "I can handle a ten-minute ride."

He didn't hug me again, but it wouldn't have erased the worry in his eyes anyway. Only my feet, metal and real, on Berk soil would do so.

I mounted Toothless slowly; he closed his eyes to relish the moment. The men cleared as Toothless sprinted for a takeoff. The sea air rushed passed us like an old friend; so did the other Vikings.

"There's just one thing we need to do before heading home," I told Toothless. He understood.

We soared higher above the others, right above the cloud cover. The moon grew as we neared it and gained a greenish tinge. The wind blew colder, cutting through the bandages. At the right moment, I leaned off my dragon, letting the harness come loose. The stars watched like silent, startled specters.

We didn't fall for long, not long enough to alert my father into flying. Our heads barely touched the cloud cover when Toothless scooped me onto his back. I heard him warbling happily, and he had managed a toothless smile at me. We rejoined the others, who cheered at seeing us glide.

"It's good to have you on your dragon!" Fishlegs exclaimed. "You really scared all of us without one."

"I wasn't scared," Tuffnut bragged. Ruffnut looked at him. "No, really; I just got those tingly feelings instead of the usual stars."

"I can't feel fear," Snotlout said. "I was never terrified when you nearly lost Toothless." Hookfang went into a dive, and his rider's screams soared away.

"You've scared me too many times to count," Astrid added. She would have punched me if our dragons were flying nose-to-nose. "But that's not going to happen again."

"I hope not. Don't think my arms could take it." I managed a genuine smile.

She gave a grim smirk and put on speed. I nudged Toothless to follow. Our dragons left blurred streaks as we raced. Berk's burnt shores loomed on the horizon.

My name is Hiccup; you may know me as the Dragon Conqueror or Dragon Trainer, depending on your local trader's gossip. Wanted posters bear my name in crude runes and children think I withhold vital dragon knowledge. But I'm more than an infamous, scrawny teenager who had once taken a leap of faith. Berk's finest Vikings had set aside the offer of thirty sheep and risked their lives to fight potential invaders. They had accepted burn marks and shavings and missed uniforms without complaint. Okay, maybe some complaints, but not directed at me.

If the last week had taught me anything, I was someone worth protecting.

The End

End
file.